

**SMALL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES**  
**Fresh Stimulus for a Forward-looking Church**



# SMALL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

Fresh Stimulus for a Forward-looking Church



Edited by  
**Klaus Krämer and Klaus Vellguth**



**SMALL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES (One World Theology, Volume 2)  
Fresh Stimulus for a Forward-looking Church**

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## Preface

Over a period of several decades Basic Ecclesial Communities / Small Christian Communities have succeeded in changing the countenance of the Church, giving it a human, personal, spiritual and good-neighbourly face. It is to the development of these communities that the second volume of the *One World Theology* edition is devoted. This edition, the product of an initiative by *missio* in Aachen, is a universal Church forum in which theologians from different local churches set forth their views on theological questions and topical issues.

The present volume has five chapters comprising reflections on Basic Ecclesial Communities / Small Christian Communities. In the first chapter the authors consult the biblical sources and examine the extent to which life in Small Christian Communities takes up the biblical vision. Addressing this issue from an African perspective, André Kabasele Mukenge goes back to the Pentecost, the Emmaus pericope and the records in the Acts of the Apostles about the life of the early Christian community in Jerusalem and maps out prospects for life as it is lived in Small Christian Communities. Felix Wilfred, a theologian from India, looks for possible clues in the Bible and points out that it was not the synagogue but the 'house church' that served as a model for the early Christians. Proceeding from the universal Church as a pastoral learning community, Ludwig Schick draws on the experience of Small Christian Communities that he gained in his capacity as Chairman of the Commission for International Church Affairs of the German Bishops' Conference, especially during a fact-finding tour to South Korea. Pablo Richard Guzmán, meanwhile, looks at the history of the Ecclesial Base Communities in the documents of the General Conferences of the Latin American Bishops, establishes references to the New Testament and reviews the current debates about the present state and possible future of the Ecclesial Base Communities.

The articles in the second chapter examine the spirituality of Small Christian Communities. Drawing on the records documenting the life and spirit of the early Christian communities, Nicodème Kalonji Ngoyi considers the consequences they have for the spirituality of the Small Christian Communities, which is characterised by openness, the power of faith and a missionary and prophetic attitude. Victor Hernández begins by venturing a definition, describing spirituality as a source of motivation. Concerning the spirituality of Ecclesial Base Communities, he says that they become a privileged location wherever they afford opportunities for the individual members to develop and demonstrate their qualities. John Mansford Prior, who has been a close observer of Small Christian Communities in Indonesia for very many years, regards Small Christian Communities as a different form of church structure from those that are founded on participation and dialogue. He sees in them “the best place to birth and mature a biblical spirituality, the small trusting community where the members themselves learn to live and act joyfully in solidarity with the victims of local and global injustice, where they both spontaneously and consciously fuse the best of their cultural values with those of the Gospel.” In his contribution Franz-Peter Tebartz-van Elst outlines a spirituality which is marked by “interaction between the Word and the Sacrament, between gathering and sending out, between the Christian creed and agape”.

In the third chapter the authors investigate the ecclesiological understanding of the Small Christian Communities. Agbonkhanmeghe E. Orobator examines the ecclesiological character of the Small Christian Communities from an African standpoint. He recalls the statements made in both the post-synodal apostolic exhortations *Ecclesia in Africa* and *Africae munus* and elaborates on the extent to which Small Christian Communities form the nucleus of a Christian community and mission. Barbara Sweet-Hansen presents the ecclesiological models of Latin American theologians, amongst others, and advocates an ecclesiology interpreted as being “a plural dynamic, which is cultural to the extent that it blends in with the culture of other nations, and political to the extent that it stands in the service of the intellectual progress of the ecclesiastical community itself and reshapes everything”. Michael Amaladoss classifies the Small Christian Communities as an ecclesiological reality, of which it can be said that the holy, Catholic and apostolic Church is truly present and active in

it. Addressing the ecclesiological foundation of the Small Christian Communities, the contribution on “A New Way of Being Church” points out that these communities form the local church; they practise an ecclesiology of communion and are committed to the mission of the Church. The spiritual encounter with the biblical texts is classified in pneumatological terms and placed in the context of communication and the debate within the universal Church.

In the fourth chapter the authors trace the historical development of the Small Christian Communities in Africa, Latin America, Asia and Europe (exemplified for Europe by their growth in Germany). First, Joseph G. Healey describes the progress made by Small Christian Communities in Africa and shows that their emergence there was independent of the processes leading to the formation of Ecclesial Base Communities in Latin America. The European perspective is reflected in the contribution entitled “A Spark Ignites a Flame”. This discusses the two processes leading initially to the development of Basic Ecclesial Communities (primarily in the 1980s) and then of Small Christian Communities (since the year 2000) in Germany. It examines the extent to which these processes can be seen as a successful example of comparative pastoral ministry in the universal Church as a learning community. José Ferrari Marins subsequently deals with the emergence of Ecclesial Base Communities in Latin America, especially after Medellín (1968), and draws attention to strategic lessons that can be learned from the experience of the past so that (new) life can be breathed into the Ecclesial Base Communities. Estela P. Padilla makes reference in her contribution to a study coordinated by the East Asian Pastoral Institute on Small Christian Communities in Asia and highlights the consequences for the understanding of Church and mission, for the creation of a new image (and understanding) of the Church and for the transformation of the passing on of faith.

The final chapter is devoted to the visions of ministry of the Small Christian Communities. Pius Rutechura considers Small Christian Communities to be a fertile ground for the inculturation of the Gospel and the healing of wounds. He recalls the encyclical *Redemptoris Missio*, in which Small Christian Communities are described as a “sign of vitality within the Church, an instrument of formation and evangelization, and a solid starting point for a new society based on

a “civilization of love.” Writing from a Latin American perspective, Socorro Martínez Maqueo says that the Ecclesial Base Communities are a process and a way of being Church in permanent development. She highlights the challenges facing the Ecclesial Base Communities, which undertake missionary work and live their “commitment to the transformation of society”. Thomas Vijay draws attention to the inculturation of the Developing Indian Integral Pastoral Approach (DIIPA), stressing in particular the significance of an authentic, Asian spirituality for the pastoral implementation of this approach. Finally, Christian Hennecke and Dieter Tewes examine the vision of ministry of the Small Christian Communities, which provides the ecclesial framework for the practice of a new way of being Church. They describe the way in which a pastoral approach inspired by basic communities can help to achieve results in Germany, as it has done elsewhere.

Numerous terms (sometimes synonymous, sometimes with a specific connotation) are used by the authors to describe the vibrant, spiritually imbued basic ecclesial groups. They range from Small Christian Communities (SCCs), Basic Ecclesial Communities (BECs) and Basic Christian Communities (BCCs) to Ecclesial Base Communities (CEBs), a term frequently used in the Latin American context. The descriptions used by the authors have not been changed. While this means accepting a linguistic heterogeneity, it helps to safeguard the semantic nuances associated with the individual terms.

The different contributions in this volume reflect the lively dialogue within the universal Church, for which we owe a debt of gratitude to the authors but also to many others. Our special thanks go to the staff at *missio*, who have helped us in devising this volume: Dr. Hadwig Müller, Dr. Marco Moerschbacher, Dr. Otmar Oehring and Prof. DDr. h.c. Raul Fornet-Betancourt. We should also like to thank Michael Meyer for the careful compilation of the manuscripts. We sincerely hope that this volume will help to stimulate interest in the pastoral model of Small Christian Communities / Basic Ecclesial Communities.

Klaus Krämer  
Klaus Vellguth

## **Biblical References and Foundation**



# The Biblical Approach of Basic Ecclesial Communities – Aspects of their Fundamental Principles

André Kabasele Mukenge

## Introduction

At the sixth Plenary Assembly of the Bishops' Conference of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, which was attended predominantly by European bishops, a firm decision was made to realign pastoral care by setting up vibrant Christian communities.<sup>1</sup> The declared objectives associated with this decision included:

- strengthening belief in God and in the Gospel of Christ in the daily lives of the Congolese population;
- consolidating the significance of the Church as a community of the faithful, integrating national culture more extensively and thus encouraging participation by the population in community development;
- training responsible men and women to make an active contribution to the Christian communities, thereby strengthening the laity;
- leading the people of God, in the light of the Gospel, towards the gradual acceptance of responsibility for social problems.

To make it clear from the outset, this decision resulted from the bitter acknowledgement that, after over 50 years of evangelisation, the establishment of many institutions geared towards evangelisation

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<sup>1</sup> Actes de la VI<sup>e</sup> Assemblée Plénière de l'Episcopat du Congo (20 novembre - 2 décembre 1961), Léopoldville 1961, 35; 181. See also Saint Moulin, L. de /N'ganzi, R. (ed.), *Eglise et société. Le discours socio-politique de l'Eglise catholique du Congo 1956-1998*, Textes de la Conférence Episcopale Kinshasa 1998, 74f.

including schools, churches, hospitals and orphanages, and a growing number of baptisms and other sacramental acts, the Gospel had not become sufficiently entrenched in the country's daily life and culture.

This paradoxical situation is summed up aptly by two enduringly popular sayings: "*Baptised, but not evangelised*"; "*Church in the morning, fetish priest in the evening*". The new religion's inability to provide people with security in the face of their daily trials and innumerable fears finds expression in the latter phrase,<sup>2</sup> this despite the fact that, through their new-found faith, the converted should find a new identity which guides them to a personal and collective reassessment. Ideally, it should help them take responsibility and perform duties. Ultimately, it should motivate them to bear witness.<sup>3</sup>

The biblical foundations of the Basic Ecclesial Community's approach to pastoral care are usually located in the Acts of the Apostles.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, "the new way of life", which would, in future, prove significant for adherents of the "new way", is described therein in several synopses (Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-35; 5:12-16). I beg to differ and take the liberty of suggesting an alternative point of departure: the community of disciples after the Passion of Christ.

Initially, it is important to state that the pastoral ministry offered by the Basic Ecclesial Communities (CEB = communautés ecclésiales de base) aims to meet the challenge of establishing caring communities in which faith is lived out in daily life by paying closer attention to believers' lifestyles and tangible desires; communities which not only exist formally and institutionally, but which offer scope for spontaneity and in which diverse charismatic manifestations are given space to emerge; smaller communities than the conventional parish communities, in which the practices of agape, sharing and solidarity

<sup>2</sup> For more detailed information see: Kabasele Mukenge, A., *Les manifestations de l'identité chrétienne au Congo-Kinshasa, De l'affirmation aux dérives*, in: *Forum Mission 3* (2007), 72-89.

<sup>3</sup> Current studies on the subject of Christian obligation include: Bakadisula Madila, C., *Le rôle socio-politique des laïcs chrétiens au Congo (R.D.C.), Pour un laïcat chrétien dynamique*, Saarbrücken 2011.

<sup>4</sup> See in this context: Mesters, C., *La lecture du livre des Actes des Apôtres dans les communautés ecclésiales de base du Brésil*, in: Berdier, M. (ed.), *Les Actes des Apôtres. Histoire, récit, théologie*, Paris 2005, 231-242.

are encouraged via human intimacy. In short, communities tailored to human needs in which the humanity of faith is experienced, as Cardinal Malula wished: “We must urge the current parishes to divide themselves into small communities tailored to human needs.”<sup>5</sup>

These are the various aspects referred to when alluding to “Basic Ecclesial Communities”, “Small Christian Communities” or “Vibrant Basic Ecclesial Communities” (CEVB = Communauté Ecclésiale Vivante de Base).<sup>6</sup>

### **The Paschal Community or the necessity to live in ecclesial communion**

The gospels allow us to share in the invigoration of a religious community which emerged from the Easter experience. The achievement of either one or several goals and the realisation of an ideal or common values, which are lived out as examples and passed on, are always at the heart of the establishment of any human community. It is interesting to note the change which takes place within the community of Jesus’ disciples after his Passion.

We must bear in mind that this is, in the first instance, a *community which learns of the continued presence of the resurrected Christ* and becomes aware of this truth, albeit gradually, but all the more strongly in consequence. The reports of the appearances serve to confirm this presence to the immediate witnesses and the remainder of the community. Let us note that a role allocation among these witnesses can be observed from the very beginning. It follows that John reached the tomb first, but did not go in, while Peter, who did not run as fast, entered the tomb before him (John 20:3-8). It is striking that the women in this community are not marginalised; as the first witnesses of the Resurrection, they are responsible for telling the apostles the glad tidings (John 20:17-18). As a result, everyone in the community is assigned a specific role. Hence it is possible to contend even at this point that a Christian community is fundamentally determined by the

<sup>5</sup> Malula, J.A., *L’Eglise à l’heure de l’africanité*, Kinshasa 1973, 5.

<sup>6</sup> In Africa, these communities have different designations depending on the respective churches: “Vibrant Christian Communities”, “Basic Christian Communities”, “Basic Family Communities”, “Basic Ecclesial Communities”, “Vibrant Ecclesial Communities”, etc. See Ramazani Bishwende, A., *Eglise-famille-de-Dieu. Esquisse d’une ecclésiologie africaine*, Paris 2001, 45.

experience of the presence of Jesus Christ. Is this not reminiscent of the words attributed to Jesus himself: “For where two or three meet in my name, I am there among them.” (Matthew 18:20)? Viewed in this light, a Basic *Ecclesial* Community differs from any other neighbourhood organisation, a club of friends or an association insofar as it is founded on the presence of Jesus Christ in its midst. It is aware of this presence and endeavours to make it tangible. In other words, a Basic Ecclesial Community convenes *in the name of Christ*.<sup>7</sup>

And, like the Paschal Community, it receives the message of peace in order to advocate the cause of peace itself: “Peace be with you” (John 20:19). Here, peace should be understood in the sense of the Hebrew *shalom*: not merely signifying the absence of war and conflict but, beyond this, fullness of life, well-being and happiness.

In order to underscore the significance of the experience of Jesus Christ’s presence I suggest, as a paradigm, the account of the disciples on their way to Emmaus (Luke 24:12-35), which, to my mind, outlines the path of faith, emphasising both its demands and the necessity to join a religious community in order to bear witness.

The two disciples who set out from Jerusalem on the way to their village of Emmaus are very disappointed and despondent. “Our own hope had been that he would be the one to set Israel free. [...]” (verse 21), they tell the stranger they meet along the way. Note the centrifugal shift they complete: they leave the community of disciples and return to the natural community of their village. At this point in time they had not yet experienced the presence of Jesus Christ: “But their eyes were prevented from recognising him” (verse 16). However, at the end of their journey, their disappointment turns to hope and instead of withdrawing they open themselves to the community of faith.

Their return to Emmaus can be compared to a retreat into seclusion, because expectations were not met and yearnings left unsatisfied. African Christians confronted with existential problems employ a similar tactic, returning to traditional “solutions”: “*Church in the morning, fetish priest in the evening*”, similar to any other believer

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. 1 Corinthians 3:11: “For nobody can lay down any other foundation than the one which is there already, namely Jesus Christ.”

who, overwhelmed by events, fails to see salvation in the Gospel of Christ, which is a gospel of the cross, of service and of love.

So what helps the disciples from Emmaus to break the chains of their isolation so that they can rejoin the community they have abandoned?

One thing which successfully galvanises them is *the contemplation of the Word of God*. As they walk, the stranger explains all the Scripture passages concerning Jesus Christ to the two disciples (verses 27 and 32). This Christological interpretation of the Holy Scripture permits an understanding of the central role played by Jesus Christ and the significance of His life as an example to the believer and his community. Christ is ever present in the Holy Scriptures. We can say that Christ, who joins the two disciples on the road, teaches them where believers can first learn the meaning of community: in reading the Word of God together and in its contemplation. The Word should not be read and contemplated arbitrarily but judiciously in order to comprehend the unique mystery of Christ. Today, close attentiveness to the interpretation of the Word of God and its collective contemplation is of crucial importance. Indeed, we observe an unequivocal shift towards fundamentalism in many groups, which fails to produce true ecclesial communities, but rather self-isolating sects.<sup>8</sup> As we will learn below, an ecclesial community is never self-contained – it is always there to welcome the other, the stranger. A second recognition of this presence is achieved during the *communal meal*, the *place of communion and sharing*. The account's catechetical function is highlighted by the fact that the stranger assumes the role of family patriarch: he takes the bread, blesses it, breaks it and hands it to them (verse 30). Here we have four profound, instructive words. They prevent the act of eating from falling into the possible trap of violence and egotism. The *blessing* expresses the acknowledgement of God as the one who gives. The *breaking of the bread* forms the prelude to the joyful act of sharing and solidarity. It comes as no surprise to learn that the eyes of the disciples from Emmaus are opened in the wake of this "Eucharistic" gesture. They have understood life's meaning and the Passion of Christ and, above all, the imperative nature of his superlative gesture

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<sup>8</sup> Kabasele Mukenge, A., *Lire la Bible dans une société en crise. Études d'herméneutique interculturelle*, Kinshasa 2007, 11f.

of self-sacrifice, symbolised in the Eucharist. This prompts them to return to Jerusalem to rejoin their religious community that very same night: “[...] There they found the Eleven assembled together with their companions” (verse 33). The significance of the return to their community becomes even more explicit in the light of the fact that the disciples from Emmaus had urged their guest to stay with them, as “it is nearly evening” (verse 29). The lateness of the hour does not deter them from returning to the community they had left that same morning.<sup>9</sup> And there they find a community in the process of acknowledging Jesus’ resurrection: “The Lord has indeed risen [...]” (verse 34a). A community in which sharing and bearing witness with others who have also experienced Christ’s presence is utterly natural: “[...] and has appeared to Simon” (verse 34b). A community in which members encourage one another by accepting even the weakest, as in the case of Thomas: “We have seen the Lord” (John 20:25).

It is possible to extrapolate several characteristics of a Basic Ecclesial Community from this account: it unites believers who have experienced Christ’s presence and share this experience with one another; believers who allow themselves to be guided by Christ’s life in their understanding of Holy Scripture, a life which not only serves them as a key to interpret Jewish Old Testament scripture, but also the history of mankind; believers who allow their eyes to be opened via the Eucharistic gesture, whose significance lies in openness towards those who are different, in solidarity and in sharing. It is a community which advances, which is capable of negotiating taxing times of hopelessness, discouragement and unhappiness, and which welds together in order to witness the power of the resurrected Christ.

### **The Post-Paschal Community in the power of the Spirit**

As discussed above, the Acts of the Apostles features brief, idyllically imbued descriptions of the first Christian community. Today, experts are debating whether the author actually reproduces the reality of his era in these accounts, or whether we encounter a

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<sup>9</sup> This importance of community for the faithful who shared in the Easter experience is one of the foundation stones of African culture, in which, as Monseigneur Monsengwo discerns: “Life means being part of a community.” Cf. Laurent Monsengwo Pasinya, *Lesprit communautaire africain*, Kinshasa 1982, 5.

depiction of an aspired-to ideal. At all events, the flock of disciples undergoes a transformation in the light of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Just as, after Jesus' death, the awareness of the presence of the resurrected Christ allowed the disciples to embark on the creation of a religious community, the awareness of the presence of an exceptional power helps this young community to define and develop itself, as its members become Christ's witnesses<sup>10</sup> in vibrant ecclesial communities.

From now on, the Basic Ecclesial Communities are equipped with a tangible organisational model which aids them in their search for the unique aspects which constitute their defining features.

The first Pentecost, described in great detail in the Acts of the Apostles, teaches us that it is possible to overcome our fears and pluck up the courage required to bear witness to our faith in a community enlivened by the grace of the Holy Spirit. The disciples relinquish their fear of the Jews and bear witness to the resurrection. Once more we encounter the call to strike forth on one's path and not to allow oneself to become discouraged and weakened. An authentic ecclesial community appeals to its members to go through life as "upright" individuals who are willing to bear witness to their faith. This is not limited to evangelising or persuading sectarians, but is also determined by efforts to remain open to others. The community envisages integration of this nature from the outset, something which can be inferred from the fact that everyone hears the disciples' testimony in his own native language (Acts 2:8). Respect for others is at issue, for their otherness, their convictions and their cultural and historical journeys.

Is there anything else to be said? To my mind, this aspect is one of the chief challenges faced by pastoral ministry in the Basic Ecclesial Communities, which seek to integrate members in all their diversity, uniting the same fundamental convictions of the Gospel as they do so.

Let us consider one of the key passages in the Acts of the Apostles: "These remained faithful to the teaching of the apostles, to the brotherhood, to the breaking of bread and to the prayers.

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<sup>10</sup> In this respect, no one refers to the Acts of the Apostles as the "Gospel of the Holy Spirit". See: Sarah, R., Conférence inaugurale, in: Les Actes des Apôtres et les jeunes Eglises. Actes du Deuxième Congrès des Bibliistes Africains, Kinshasa 1990, 5.

And everyone was filled with awe; the apostles worked many signs and miracles. And all who shared the faith owned everything in common; they sold their goods and possessions and distributed the proceeds among themselves according to what each one needed. Each day, with one heart, they regularly went to the Temple but met in their houses for the breaking of bread; they shared their food gladly and generously; they praised God and were looked up to by everyone. Day by day the Lord added to their community those destined to be saved.” (Acts 2:42-47).

This excerpt can be used to accentuate the following points:

- A Basic Ecclesial Community *unites on the basis of doctrine*: the Word of God is at its core and constitutes the community’s guiding principles. By referring to the apostles, the text implies the entitlement to orthodoxy. As a result, the Basic Ecclesial Community is not a sect or an esoteric group; it preserves the communion with each and every believer, i.e. with the entire Church.
- A Basic Ecclesial Community reiterates the gestures of Jesus within its inner sanctum; those gestures by which he was recognised, such as the breaking of the bread.
- A Basic Ecclesial Community is a place of sharing and solidarity, where human hardships are taken seriously. As far as this aspect is concerned, other excerpts of the Acts of the Apostles demonstrate that this ideal was not always put into practice, as illustrated by the protest by widows of Greek origin who were overlooked in the daily distribution (Acts 6:1). The account of this episode serves both as a lesson and as a warning to future generations of readers. Christian witness calls for acts of selfless sharing and solidarity which knows no bounds. In this regard, the Acts of the Apostles shows us that the community is an instrument of God in the world: it assumes the role of bearing witness.
- A Basic Ecclesial Community is a place of common prayer which retains a link with the official houses of prayer. In the Acts of the Apostles, members of the community break bread and praise God in their various places of residence, yet

continue to visit the temple. The secession from the temple occurs only later, when the Jews' religious leaders turn the Christians away, ultimately viewing them as a dangerous sect. Be that as it may, prayer as such is, by definition, the expression of a "Communion-Vivante-Avec"<sup>11</sup>, a communion of vibrant interaction.

- A Basic Ecclesial Community is a place of inclusion. It is important to note this, as it demonstrates that withdrawal from the Church is not the intention: the biblical passage cited above mentions the admission of new members and their potential integration within the community. Likewise, the Basic Ecclesial Community should accept all those who turn to it and strengthen equality among its members, an equality which does not detract, however, from the diversity of roles and responsibilities within it.

In my view, it is important to call attention to one final aspect: the Acts of the Apostles not only describes communities in which all is well; it also recounts difficulties, ordeals and conflicts which mar life in the early Christian community. It teaches us how to overcome conflicts within the Church.<sup>12</sup> The most interesting example of this doubtless occurs in Acts 15:1-35, an episode which is commonly referred to as "The Council of Jerusalem". This passage shows us that the conflict is resolved via communication; the various viewpoints are heard and contrasted (verses 7, 12, 13 and 22); the role of the elders is emphasised (verses 6, 22 and 23); the special status of the "apostles" is acknowledged; and the subordination to the Holy Spirit is clearly underscored (verse 28). The need to reach a consensus and the desire to find a mutual solution which is nonetheless based on the Word of God (verses 22 and 25) can be clearly felt in Acts 15. Here, too, we encounter loyally tenacious adherence to received doctrine in the form of a pledge of receptiveness for the ministry of the Holy

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<sup>11</sup> This expression was coined by Agossou, M.J, *Foi chrétienne et spiritualité africaine, Notre réponse et notre responsabilité*, in: *LAfrique et ses formes de vie spirituelle, Actes du deuxième Colloque International, Kinshasa 21-27/II/1983*, 17 (1983) 33-34, 308.

<sup>12</sup> The dispute between the Hellenists and the Hebrews in support of the widows has already been mentioned (Acts 6:1). Other examples include the arguments between Paul and Barnabas (Acts 15:36-40) and between Peter and Paul.

Spirit. However, new responsibilities are also created by dispatching emissaries to Antioch (verse 22).

We realise that the ecclesial community is not a complete whole; it evolves in the power of the Spirit and through reading the signs of the times. It is on its way.

We also learn that an ecclesial community requires an organisation and structures and the establishment of corresponding administrative bodies in order to ensure that its various members assume responsibility and are able to place themselves at the service of the Gospel. Administrative offices of this nature arise as a result of requirements within the community, as in the case of the Seven (deacons) in Acts 6:1-7 or the men sent to Antioch in Acts 15:22.

## Conclusion

“How good, how delightful it is to live as brothers all together!” (Psalm 133:1). This verse from a pilgrims’ song contains an early echo of the community ideal felt by Israel’s pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem. One can imagine them, striving for the same goal, confronted with the same ordeals on their journey and guided by the same hope, the same faith. The wandering pilgrims experienced solidarity and sharing in this manner, trusting in God’s immutable presence (Psalm 121). They knew but one urgency: to arrive in the House of the Lord, where they would find peace and share in the community of all the people of Israel (Psalms 122 and 125).

“Behold, how they love one another [...]”, cried the heathens in the face of the fraternal harmony exuded by the first communities, the Basic Communities. The harmony and solidarity which characterised these communities thus became a hallmark of Christianity. This corresponds to Jesus’ own wishes as expressed during his parting from the disciples according to the Gospel of John: “It is by your love for one another, that everyone will recognise you as my disciples.” (John 13:35). And he asks God for unity (“that they all may be one”, John 17:21) and for the Holy Spirit (John 14:16 and 26). It is essential to experience full communion in the power of the Holy Spirit.

The paradigm of the disciples from Emmaus, who travel as pilgrims, reminds us that the creation of ecclesial communities

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constitutes an ongoing task, and that the Spirit abiding within their members leads the latter on new and unforeseen paths in order to open their eyes to the challenges denoted by brotherhood, solidarity and sharing.



# Why Basic Ecclesial Communities?

Felix Wilfred

## A Church that radiates light

Nothing could better illustrate the enormous attractiveness of Basic Ecclesial Communities<sup>13</sup> in Latin America than the words of an ordinary woman stating what she experienced on Christmas Eve: “At Christmas the three Protestant churches were brightly lit and full of people. We could hear people singing. [...] But our Catholic church remained dark and locked! We had been unable to find a priest anywhere.”<sup>14</sup> What we need now is a Church that radiates light and testifies that Jesus lives in the community of His followers. Basic Ecclesial Communities, led by committed Christians, keep the flame of faith alive so that it shines forth brightly. One of the tragedies afflicting the Catholic Church is that it has become so closely associated with the priesthood and its own hierarchical structures. Hence, any renewal of the Church is seen merely as a reform of its clergy.

## Paradigm shift

Basic Ecclesial Communities were a paradigm shift in ecclesiology. A Church which had long centred around bishops and priests finally turned towards people and the community. This revolution was triggered by the Second Vatican Council. The mere fact that God’s people were given greater prominence at the Council than the Church hierarchy is a clear sign that this revolution actually happened, even though it has not yet been completed in all its aspects. The new theological vision had to be put into practice. From the Second Vatican

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<sup>13</sup> They have a variety of names: Small Christian Communities, Basic Christian Communities, Basic Ecclesial Communities, etc. In this article the different terms are used synonymously.

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in Boff, L., *Die Neuentdeckung der Kirche, Basisgemeinschaften in Lateinamerika*, Mainz 1985, 13.

Council onwards there was a move to rely on certain new structures, such as the pastoral council, the parish council or the church council and similar committees where God's people were represented by lay members, clergy and members of religious orders. These structural innovations were far from adequate, however.

New tools were required to give life to the vision of the Church as God's people. Basic Ecclesial Communities are, to some extent, a realisation of this vision in which the Church is seen as a community. The shift of emphasis onto God's people and the community is a paradigm shift towards a participatory Church. To understand what this means we might repeat the frequently asked question as to whether structures such as a pastoral council or church council are consultative or advisory in character. Bishop Francis Claver of the Philippines, one of the leading proponents of Basic Ecclesial Communities in his country, says, however, that such questions ignore the paradigm shift that has taken place.<sup>15</sup> They would only make sense within a model centred upon the Church hierarchy, where these structures are merely seen as tools to involve the laity, yet without fundamentally changing the exercise of authority as such. This explains the concerns that the authority of the priests and bishops should not be questioned and that the various committees should be purely consultative in character. Under the new paradigm of participatory Church such questions have no place and make no sense.

### **The emergence of a local church**

Small Christian Communities can be seen as specific embodiments of the ecclesiological vision of the Second Vatican Council, as described, in particular, in *Lumen Gentium* and *Gaudium et Spes*. To counter the strongly centralised concept of the universal Church, the Second Vatican Council talked about "particular churches", meaning diocesan and local churches. The diocesan laity and clergy who are gathered around their bishop and the Eucharist are a symbol of that particular church. Basic Ecclesial Communities constitute a further step towards fleshing out the mystery of the Church. The Second Vatican Council rarely used the term "local church". Instead, it preferred to talk about

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<sup>15</sup> Claver, F., Basic Christian Communities in a Wider Context, in: East Asian Pastoral Review 23 (1986) 3, 362-368.

“particular churches”. Basic Ecclesial Communities add a new shape and a new profile to our understanding of the local church. A local church focuses more closely on its socio-cultural environment. It cares for the people and the culture of the society in which it finds itself.<sup>16</sup> As an embodiment of the local church, a Basic Ecclesial Community endeavours to get alongside ordinary people in their everyday lives and to live out its faith under specific circumstances.

### Living in community

The second major element to stimulate a new Church model, as expressed through Basic Ecclesial Communities, came from an understanding of Church as *communio*. According to this view, the Church is not a collection of institutions, structures and centres of authority, but rather an *intersubjective reality*. In other words, the Church is about relationships, as expressed largely by the term *communio* or fellowship. In fact, the mystery of the Church has been inspired in its emergence by the relationship between the three Persons of the Trinity. Our modern life and experience show very clearly that systems can become impersonal and develop an existence of their own, detached from people. If a concept of Church is too heavily centred upon authority and based on structures, it will suffer the same fate as any system and will tend to function in the same impersonal way. The Second Vatican Council led us to a new level by making us realise that Church is a community in which people share their lives in love and fellowship. To understand this we must remind ourselves of the famous distinction made by the German sociologist, Ferdinand Tönnies, between *society* and *community*. While the former focuses on the system, the latter is a realisation of *communio*. The theological aspect of Church as a community – i.e. the foundational element of Basic Ecclesial Communities – can also be illustrated by numerous insights into communication theory.

<sup>16</sup> I would like to add a personal note at this point: When I was Secretary of the Theological Advisory Commission of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC), we wrote a document for the conference entitled “Theses on the Local Church”, in which we defined the nature of the local church with an emphasis on its socio-cultural context. In the document it says that it “approaches the reality of the local church because it results from an encounter between the Gospel and the culture of a nation (Theses 5-9)”. On the text of the document See Tirimanna, V. (ed.), *Sprouts of Theology from the Asian Soil*, Collection of TAC and OTC Documents (1987-2007), Bangalore 2007, 19-68.

A Basic Ecclesial Community is an attempt to live out the elementary reality of faith, which is by nature communal, in all its aspects. This reality is not about the faith of an individual and his God, but about a faith that is essentially shared by the community. Faith, therefore, requires a living fellowship of individuals interacting with one another. This ensures that their faith grows through mutual support. The second fundamental reality, which is love, is by its very nature always mutual within a community. Hope, too, is something which we share in a community, because our destinies are ultimately connected. In a nutshell, Basic Ecclesial Communities are essentially founded on faith, love and hope as elements which are entirely of a communal nature. This explains why Basic Ecclesial Communities form an environment that is conducive to living out Christian experiences. This important truth prompted John Paul II to describe these communities as signs of hope for the Church: “A rapidly growing phenomenon in the young churches – one sometimes fostered by the bishops and their Conferences as a pastoral priority – is that of ‘ecclesial basic communities’ ... which are proving to be good centres for Christian formation and missionary outreach. These are groups of Christians who, at the level of the family or in a similarly restricted setting, come together for prayer, Scripture reading, catechesis, and discussion on human and ecclesial problems with a view to a common commitment. These communities are a sign of vitality within the Church, an instrument of formation and evangelisation, and a solid starting point for a new society based on a ‘civilisation of love.’”<sup>17</sup>

### **In the footsteps of Jesus**

Basic Ecclesial Communities help us to walk closely and directly in the footsteps of Jesus. When Jesus gave his declaration in Nazareth, he made it clear that the good news is aimed at the poor (Luke 4:18-19). In our modern world we can often see a calculated attempt to turn a blind eye to the poor and to the harsh reality of poverty. Although each day repeatedly demonstrates the failure of capitalism, particularly because it is an ongoing source of suffering for the poor, there are attempts to prove that it is a healthy system and has helped

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<sup>17</sup> RM 51. The importance of Basic Ecclesial Communities for the life of the Church and for its evangelistic mission was also highlighted by Paul VI. See EN.

to remove poverty. Such window-dressing is an attempt to show that there is less poverty today.<sup>18</sup> The truth, however, is quite different. Like all other systems, the Church hierarchy can easily function on its own by turning the poor into objects of charity and of good deeds. Jesus, however, paints a vision in which the poor are the main protagonists and the recipients of the good news of the Kingdom of God (Luke 6:20-23). The Basic Ecclesial Communities which we find in most developing countries (i.e. in Latin America, Africa and Asia) are communities of the poor. Christianity in those regions traditionally used to be dominated by the powerful, the elites, the landowners and members of the higher castes. Basic Ecclesial Communities provide a model in which there is no room for such a distinction or for discrimination. They are communities where all members are equal. They are open spaces with a listening ear for the voices of the poor and for their experiences, struggles and hopes.

Another dimension that reflects the Spirit of Jesus Christ is that these communities are quite small in size. Throughout the Gospel we can see Jesus working with contrasts. Take, for instance, his contrasting parables. The reason why he had to work with contrasts was that the good news to the poor required a model that was different from the dominating model. The main thrust of Jesus' teachings was his emphasis on the small, marginalised and neglected, which is hidden from the eyes of the world. While his disciples were overwhelmed by the size and grandeur of the Temple in Jerusalem – an architectural gem of its time – Jesus was totally unimpressed (Luke 21:5). Instead, he refers them to the poor widow who gave her last two pennies and praises her for her generosity (Luke 21:1-4 and Mark 12:41-44). He speaks of the mustard seed that grows into a big tree (Matthew 13:31–32, Matthew 4:30-32, Luke 13:18-19), salt (Matthew 5:13, Mark 9:50, Luke 14:34-35) and leaven (Matthew 13:33, Luke 13:20-21) which causes fermentation yet remains hidden. We also read that Jesus praises the wisdom of those the world regards as fools. And he highlights the fact that God hides things from the wise but reveals them to babes (Matthew 11:25-27). So when we describe Christian

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<sup>18</sup> The Planning Commission of India attempted to do so, for instance, in a spirit of liberalism and globalisation. However, the way in which the poor were excluded from the statistics was criticised both by Parliament and civil society.

communities as 'small', this somehow encapsulates for us the entire Gospel and the teachings of Jesus. These Basic Ecclesial Communities are in themselves a message about the Kingdom of God, directing our attention away from the world of power and splendour. As Small Christian Communities they are active followers of Jesus Christ in continuing to proclaim the Gospel (Acts 2:42-47 and 4:32-35).

### **The model of the synagogue**

We can gain a better understanding of Basic Ecclesial Communities when we compare them with the Jewish institution of the synagogue. Whereas the Temple was in Jerusalem and a symbol of the system and of priestly authority, the synagogues were, in a way, a work of the laity. Each synagogue was a living community of a group of people. Their common bond was not so much territorial, but one of keeping together as a group that convened in order to pray, to read Scripture, to meet neighbours, to resolve community issues and to act as a kind of local 'parliament'. When the early Christians decided to follow in the footsteps of Jesus, it was not so much the Temple as the synagogue that served as a model and provided inspiration. The house churches (Romans 16:5, 1 Corinthians 16:19, Colossians 4:15, Philippians 1:2) in early Christianity can be seen as transformed synagogues. In the Acts of the Apostles we read about followers of Jesus having fellowship with one another. It was a communal life and one that was marked by mutual support and sharing. "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer." (Acts 2:42) During the first three centuries of Christianity Christians would meet in each other's homes. Lydia, for instance, offered her house as a meeting venue for her brothers and sisters in Christ (Acts 16:15 and 40). Priscilla and Aquila not only turned their house into a house church (Romans 16:4-5); they were also actively involved in Kingdom work and encouraged Paul and Apollos in their ministries (Acts 18:2-5 and 26). Others who hosted local churches in their homes were Gaius (Romans 16:23), Nymphas (Colossians 4:15) and Titus Justus (Acts 18:7).

Whenever we read about 'houses' as meeting places in records of early Christianity, this does not primarily mean buildings but *families*. In his letters Paul mentions these families several times as meeting places of local churches (Romans 16:5, 1 Corinthians

16:19, Colossians 4:15, Philippians 1:2). These experiences of Jesus' followers manifested themselves in the form of house churches. They were small fellowships which represented a new set of values. While society in antiquity praised courage, bravery, heroic deeds, etc., these fellowships were led by a different vision, in which there was a much greater emphasis on values such as tolerance, patience, forgiveness, kindness, honesty and perseverance. However, there is no mention of any endeavours to set up bigger structures. Everything was seen as provisional and perishable. The only thing that mattered was that God should be present in all things (1 Corinthians 10:31).

It is worth highlighting in this context that women played important roles in the house churches. Paul permitted them to preach and to prophesy at church meetings (1 Corinthians 11:5). In contrast to the custom at the time and what they experienced in their environment, women were not discriminated against, but appointed to leading positions. This was one of the reasons which attracted them to Christianity (Philippians 4:2 and Phoebe in Romans 16:1). The same thing can be observed today. Women play an active role in Basic Ecclesial Communities and their leadership roles often take some very unexpected forms. Another difference was the universal character of the house churches. Although these early Christian communities followed the model of the synagogue, they differed from it in an important aspect. One of the distinctive features of these communities was their openness. They reflected the universal spirit of Jesus – a spirit that transcends any ethnic exclusiveness or ghetto mentality.

Between the turning point of Christianity under Constantine and the present day there have been many different movements despite the massive institutionalisation of the Church – e.g. various mediaeval movements which gave rise to Mendicant Orders and demanded that the Church should conduct reforms and show solidarity with the poor. Today's Basic Ecclesial Communities may of course be quite different from those historical movements. Yet they do remind us of early Christianity when Jesus' followers – still rather insecure in their own identity – would gather together to remember Jesus Christ, to pray together, to break bread and to pool and share their resources (Acts 2:42-47, 4:32-35, 1 Corinthians 11:17-34). They created a new identity of their own by doing this in the name of Jesus and in accordance with his teachings.

## **Dialogue, participation and growth**

We have established that Basic Ecclesial Communities are fellowships of equals based on continuous dialogue. They are founded on hearing God's Word, listening to one another, sharing together, praying together, etc. All of God's people were seen as a royal priesthood (see 1 Peter 2:9), and this was clearly expressed among those communities which, unlike today's parish churches, were not priest-centred. Their specific realisation could be observed in the active participation of members in the liturgical mass. Ordained priests and the church hierarchy existed to minister to the people. The climate of freedom, dialogue and participation that was evident in those communities opened a path towards new forms of Church ministry. In the Early Church ministries were created in response to specific needs. They differed from one fellowship to another. The warmth and support that people experience in Basic Ecclesial Communities enables them to find their identities, to grow in faith and to develop into mature personhood. The communities with their adaptability and direct access to one another provide an ideal environment in which all members can develop in their Christian faith. Each person has his unique history and small communities are places where this history can simply be shared with others to build each other up and to grow in faith and spirituality. This is far removed from the big traditional structures in which people just go to Church services and where there is hardly any interaction or opportunity for people to share their innermost experiences of their faith. These spiritual biographies encourage other members of a small community to embark on their own spiritual journeys. All this helps to strengthen bonds within the group and to make the life of faith a joyful experience.

## **Basic Ecclesial Communities and public life**

If these fellowships were to be regarded simply as groups within the Church to help administer and manage the traditional structures of parishes and dioceses, we would be ignoring their true spirit and their true nature. Rather, the life of faith that pervades these fellowships also influences society at large. Christians who are aware of their mission and their leading role are called upon to act. Yet the situation differs substantially from one global region to another. In Latin America the most outstanding feature of Basic Ecclesial

Communities was their engagement in politics. History shows that these communities functioned as a critical force under authoritarian regimes and military dictatorships. They were seen as suspect by the state, and active members were locked up, tortured and brutally murdered. This should not come as a surprise. When Medellin and, later, Puebla spoke out on behalf of Basic Ecclesial Communities, they were regarded as protagonists of resistance against the structural injustice and poverty which caused so much suffering on the Latin American continent. These communities succeeded in changing the situation for smallholders and marginalised groups. Moreover, such groups have enormous potential in the propagation of knowledge to ordinary people.<sup>19</sup> Critics of religion were sceptical about its potential to bring about any change in society, and sociologists were doubtful that Catholicism could lead to any radical change in socio-political conditions. However, this seems to have been disproved by Basic Ecclesial Communities with their radical attitude and potential for transformation.<sup>20</sup> In other parts of the world the situation may well be different. Nevertheless, these communities are facing the major challenge of living out their Christian faith within complex socio-political *environments*. In the Philippines the first Basic Ecclesial Communities emerged in the late 1960s in the conflict-torn region of Mindanao and, later, gradually also in other parts of the country. Because of their political awareness and their resistance to the rule of the Marcos dictatorship, they were seen by the regime as a potential threat. Like in Latin America, these communities sought to help smallholders and spoke out against deforestation, expropriations, etc. This earned them trouble and persecution. At the Second General Assembly of the Bishops' Conference of the Philippines in 1991 it was decided that Basic Ecclesial Communities should be adopted as a national programme of the Church. An increasing number of bishops gave their support, as a result of which they began to spread quite rapidly. However, this was probably also the reason why Basic Ecclesial Communities began to lose their original prophetic momentum.

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<sup>19</sup> Vugt, J. Van, *Democratic Organization for Social Change, Latin American Christian Base Communities and Literacy Campaigns*, New York 1991.

<sup>20</sup> Cousineau Adriance, M., *Promised Land, Base Christian Communities and the Struggle for the Amazon*, New York 1995.

When we talk about Basic Ecclesial Communities in connection with public life, we must also be aware of their potential for democratisation. Many developing countries have military regimes or dictatorships, and even countries with democratic forms of government are often only democratic on paper. Yet true democracy requires people's active participation at the grassroots level. Because of their spirit of dialogue and cooperation Basic Ecclesial Communities have proved to be real schools of democracy. Their internal organisation and practices have offered a model for the democratisation of society at large.

### **Inter-faith harmony**

In multi-faith societies, which are to be found in most countries in Asia, a community can only be strengthened if its members befriend those of other faiths. History and experience have shown that big Church structures are perceived by our neighbours as power structures and thus as a threat to their own faith. With this in mind, Basic Ecclesial Communities have great potential for sharing the message of the Gospel. In Asia these communities are also well known for their openness towards the religious and spiritual lives of people with other faiths and for their willingness to work with them. Dialogue does not revolve around doctrinal issues, but daily life. Basic Ecclesial Communities clearly help us realise the teachings of the Second Vatican Council about the role of other religions in God's plan of salvation. Moreover, wherever religious conflicts are smouldering in south-east Asia, these communities promote human values which are shared by people from other religious traditions. This has led to an experiment called 'Basic Human Communities'. Due to their adaptability, Christian and human communities can help to promote peace and harmony in society.

### **Concluding remarks**

Basic Ecclesial Communities are like cells injecting life into the organism of the Church. Their phenomenal proliferation over the years – especially in Latin America, Africa and Asia – clearly shows how urgently we need new forms of community and a new personalised faith that involves living and sharing with others. The forms they take and the spirit in which they are realised make these communities

similar to the house churches of the early Christians. They provide Christians with an environment in which they can grow in faith, as followers of Christ, while jointly entering into a deeper experience of love, fellowship and hope. Moreover, Basic Ecclesial Communities act as specific embodiments of the local church by living and practising their faith within a given cultural and socio-political framework. Moreover, they enable lay people to take leadership responsibilities. Being small and flexible, Basic Ecclesial Communities interact effectively with their environment and bear witness to the Gospel. In many cases they play prophetic roles by questioning existing structures and by fighting injustice, exploitation and violations of human rights. These communities demonstrate a new way of being Church. It may well have been the lives and activities of Basic Ecclesial Communities – far more than any other factors – that helped to put into practice the spirit and the teachings of the Second Vatican Council.



# Letting the Bible Inspire Pastoral Activity\* – Small Christian Communities as universal Church learning opportunities for Bible-based pastoral activity

Ludwig Schick

## Mission is of the essence of the Church

“The pilgrim Church is by her very nature ‘missionary’ (i.e. sent out as an envoy), since it is from the mission of the Son and the mission of the Holy Spirit that she draws her origin, in accordance with the decree of God the Father.” These are the words used by the Second Vatican Council in the decree *Ad Gentes* to sum up the fundamental task of Church missionary activity. The message is spelled out clearly: Mission is not *one* task of the Church among others, but is of its very essence. A Church which does not see itself as missionary is a contradiction in terms and is not the Church of Jesus Christ.<sup>21</sup>

It has taken quite some time for the reappraisal of mission initiated by the Council to bear fruit in the awareness of communities and believers in Germany. Even though considerable changes have occurred in recent years, it is still not sufficiently taken for granted in Germany that the whole of Church life bears unconstrained and conscious witness to faith in Jesus Christ. Nonetheless, the awareness of the need for missionary pastoral activity and missionary awakening has increased considerably among Christians everywhere. Two publications by the German bishops have certainly contributed to this development. One is *Time to Sow the Seed. The Missionary Function of the Church*, the other is *His Salvation for All Nations – the Mission of the Universal Church*.<sup>22</sup> They deal in detail with the challenges of

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<sup>21</sup> AG 2.

<sup>22</sup> Sekretariat der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz (ed.), *Allen Völkern Sein Heil, Die Mission der Weltkirche, Die deutschen Bischöfe*, no. 76, Bonn 2004; Sekretariat der

mission in our time and have stirred many priests and lay people into action.

In contrast to *Time to Sow the Seed*, which deals principally with the situation in Germany, *His Salvation for All Nations* widens the horizon to incorporate the universal Church. “Missionary activities in our own country and in the community of nations can only blossom together; they will prove mutually enriching and benefit from exchanging experiences with local churches, particularly in the southern hemisphere.”<sup>23</sup> A little later on the document states the following with regard to Pentecost as the birth of the Church: “From the very first moment of its existence, the Church speaks all languages and yet is one in the same spirit. It did not become universal by spreading over time from town to town and country to country. It has been universal from the outset, by virtue of the Holy Spirit. It is ‘catholic’ or it is not itself.”<sup>24</sup> The main purpose of *His Salvation for All Nations* is to make clear what a missionary Church and the universal Church have in common and to remind us of the fact.

### **Mission requires two-way dialogue with local churches**

Since the setting up of the young churches as they are called, particularly those in Africa and Asia, missionary work can only be construed as an activity within the universal Church, one which poses a challenge to local churches all over the world while simultaneously enriching them. For a long time we spread the Christian message from Europe all over the world. Today, however, we know that all local churches, which are rooted in their respective cultures, have a missionary task to perform and that they carry it out. This is readily apparent in Germany. More and more members of religious orders and diocesan priests from Eastern Europe and overseas are doing pastoral work in German dioceses. Many presbyteries would no longer be occupied if it were not for a chaplain or priest from Africa or Asia, and many convents would have closed long ago if it were not for nuns

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Deutschen Bischofskonferenz (ed.), *Zeit zur Aussaat, Missionarisch Kirche sein*, Die deutschen Bischöfe, no. 68, Bonn 2000 .

<sup>23</sup> Sekretariat der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz (ed.), *Allen Völkern Sein Heil*, Die Mission der Weltkirche, 9.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* 10.

from other parts of the world. The change from a Western Church to a world Church has taken place in Germany too. This shows that missionary work in our own country and missionary responsibility in the world at large can only flourish together. We benefit jointly from an exchange of experiences with different local churches.

What is true of local churches applies to all Christians. “The more we open our eyes, hearts and hands on behalf of the universal Church among the nations, the more richly will we be bestowed and strengthened with faith as individuals and as communities”, the German bishops say in *His Salvation for All Nations*<sup>25</sup>. This refers explicitly to a renewal of the awareness of all believers concerning the mission of the universal Church. Missionary work must once again be recognised as a duty for all Christians. It is not just a task for Church officials, a field of work for specialists and a matter of individual spiritual gifts. It is the task and purpose of all Christians without distinction. ‘Universal’ and ‘missionary’ are thus two essential purposes of the Church as a whole.<sup>26</sup> It thrives on both and draws its strength from them. We are not talking here about a one-way street, one that used to run from Europe to Africa, Asia and South America and now leads in the opposite direction, from South to North. Mission is networking, bridge building and agora work. It brings together and connects the spiritual gifts, personal and material resources, missionary and pastoral experiences of all local churches. They are thus mutually enriched and become more and more ‘a Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church’ of Jesus Christ.

### **The universal Church as a pastoral learning community**

This is the reason why *His Salvation for All Nations* describes the universal Church as a community of learning, prayer and solidarity<sup>27</sup>. The Church’s mission concerns the mutual exchange of material, spiritual and intellectual gifts between the local churches within the universal Church. A learning community means, first and foremost, knowing about each other and it is a two-way process.

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid. 9.

<sup>26</sup> AG 1.

<sup>27</sup> Sekretariat der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz (ed.), *Allen Völkern Sein Heil. Die Mission der Weltkirche*, 55-60.

This is expressed in the form of numerous partnerships and meetings between communities and dioceses, orders and associations. It also covers the extensive educational work being done by aid and missionary organisations in Germany. If I found out more about the situation of the Church in Brazil through the Adveniat programme conducted during Advent, for example, or if the boys and girls who go out carol-singing know more about work with children in Nicaragua as a result of their involvement, then a learning process is taking place which raises our awareness and changes our experience as Christians in Germany.

For pastoral workers in Germany, living in a universal Church learning community basically means developing the conviction and awareness that we can learn from missionary and pastoral developments in other local churches. This does not mean transferring the pastoral concepts of one local church to another on a 1:1 basis. Each church will have to respond in its own specific way to the specific challenges and social contexts it faces. A universal Church learning community does not advocate an erroneous form of universalism which would lead to a levelling process that pays no heed to any kind of diversity in the pastoral activities of local churches. It is far more important to recognise the impulses and insights of the various local churches and to tap their benefits for one's own situation. This is initially a question of the attitude taken by our pastoral workers. The Church in Latin America, for example, has been familiar for many centuries with the challenge of having to care for large areas with only a few priests. The shortage of priests, which has become increasingly painful in Germany in recent years, has been the norm in many regions in Latin America for a long time. Many local churches have never known what it feels like to have enough pastoral workers available. That also applies to many churches in Africa and Asia. Our current 'crisis' would almost be a dream come true over there. This is something we should not forget. It may give us peace and quiet amidst all the change. Nevertheless, we would be missing an opportunity if we were not to ask how the Church manages to live and grow there despite all the adversity it faces.

For many years, universal Church ties used to mean that the European churches provided personnel and financial resources,

experience and knowledge for pastoral work in Africa, Asia and Latin America. Today, the universal Church missionary perspective is changing in many places. However, it is important to adopt a realistic approach when comparing the various initial pastoral situations in order to avoid any form of romanticism. After all, the churches of the South are not a fountain of youth from which some panacea can be drawn to cure all the problems of the Church in Europe. Conversely, the European churches' experiences and structures, which have evolved over centuries, should not simply be dismissed as outdated. A Church learning community means encouraging a process of give and take. All churches will always be able to learn from each other.

### **Small Christian Communities: the outcome of the universal Church learning community**

If one looks at the universal Church and is willing to learn, one cannot help noticing in particular the emergence of so-called Small Christian Communities or 'Basic Ecclesial Communities' (BECs) in many churches in Africa and Asia as well as in Latin America, albeit in a different form. These are not peripheral phenomena but outstanding features of pastoral activity in their local churches. In some dioceses in Asia they have even been elevated by the bishops to the status of a basic structure of pastoral activity. Looking more closely at the Small Christian Communities it should be borne in mind that they are themselves the result of a universal Church learning process. They are an expression of what Catholicism means. The concept of 'Basic Ecclesial Communities' was developed in the 1980s in the Lumko Pastoral Institute in South Africa by two German missionaries, who later became bishops, Dr. Oswald Hirmer (Umtata) and Dr Fritz Lobinger (Aliwal). It emerged in the context of an acute shortage of priests and in light of the fact that the Christian faith was only a minor part of the culture in southern Africa. The central idea in this approach was to persuade the communities to give up their passive attitude and stop expecting to be served by priests and bishops. Instead, they should be enabled to take an active part in the Church's mission. A central structural feature of the BECs was that they had neighbourhood groups in the parish context, which met regularly for bible sharing to deepen

their spiritual life. This concept, first developed for the rural parts of South Africa, was later taken up with interest by the churches in south-east Asia and given special encouragement by the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) which developed the Asian Integral Pastoral Approach (AsIPA). This represented an adaptation of BECs to the Asiatic region. If we in the Church in Germany now consider the significance that Small Christian Communities might have for pastoral activity in our country, this is in certain respects the universal Church learning process coming full circle, since it was launched by two German theologians. Such processes ought to be the rule in a universal Church, not the exception. What this development also makes clear is that there is not just one model of Small Christian Communities or Basic Ecclesial Communities – only the names differ from region to region – but that the Small Christian Communities had to blend into the culture of their respective contexts, thereby generating new forms in each case. If the grassroots communities in Latin America are included as well, the universal Church dimension of the Small Christian Communities becomes even clearer.

### **Sharing the Bible – an essential feature of universal Church missionary action**

A key feature of Small Christian Communities is the method of Bible sharing developed by Bishops Hirmer and Lobinger, which has also become widespread in Germany. Reading Holy Scripture together and discussing God's Word has assumed a prominent role. Even more important than the method, however, is the fact that the Bible is available to the nations and cultures of this world in their respective languages. This is the pre-requisite for everything that follows. Sharing the Bible in a universal Church solidarity community initially means helping to ensure that the Holy Scripture is available to all the nations of the Earth. "Proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God" (Luke 4:43) to all the world is the task of the Church. It can do no greater service to the world." These are the words with which *His Salvation for All Nations* begins. The fact that the good news of the kingdom of God can find its way to people is due not least to German missionary organisations, which provide funding for translations of the Bible and support its publication all over the world. Often enough

it is indigenous exegetes receiving grants from aid organisations who are enabled to translate the biblical texts into the various languages and dialects of their home countries. Through these types of aid, and also through the expertise in exegesis which many foreign theologians acquire at German theological colleges, we are also contributing to Bible sharing within the Church.

### **“The Bible at the heart of pastoral activity”**

What is it that distinguishes the Small Christian Communities (SCCs)? “For in the sacred books, the Father who is in heaven meets His children with great love and speaks with them.”<sup>28</sup> Hence there is no doubt that the regular Bible readings and discussions of the Holy Scripture, which are supported in the SCCs in Africa and Asia, enable the communities to become more alive and more effective in mission. After all, God Himself is approaching them in His word.

During my visit to South Korea in 2009 I was particularly struck by the extent to which active Christian believers grow as a result of reading and reflecting on Holy Scripture and then move on to get involved in their parish and exert a Christian influence on society. The Small Christian Communities there have helped to enliven the parishes and dioceses. They also enable Christian believers to talk about their faith. All too often the Church in Germany, which is in the throes of change, argues about structural reforms, whereas our brothers and sisters in the so-called mission countries show us that, without personal access to Scripture and Christ’s claim on me and my life that grows out of it, there can never be a process of renewal in our local churches. Our brothers and sisters in the universal Church appear to have a more direct access to God’s Word. They expect encouragement from what they read and hear and to find out what God’s task is for themselves and their families. My visits to Small Christian Communities in Korea and South Africa showed me that this access to God’s word could greatly enrich Christians and the Church in Germany. Reading and reflecting on Holy Scripture produces believers who actively contribute to their parish and talk freely and openly to others about their faith. Is this not precisely what we need in Germany?

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<sup>28</sup> DV 21.

### **The example of South Korea: a source of inspiration for Germany?**

During my visit to the dioceses of Suwon and Jeju in South Korea I met a lively local church which is impressive for the vigour of its spiritual life and the strength of its organisation. The enormous industrialisation since the 1950s and the associated prosperity of wide swathes of Korean society have not led to a decline in religious life. On the contrary, more than half the South Korean population actively practise their faith. The Catholic Church, in particular, enjoys great interest among the majority Buddhist population. Over 500 adult baptisms per year and parish are not exceptional. Today about 10 per cent of the South Korean population profess Catholicism and just under 30 per cent are Christian.

Pastoral care was handed over from foreign missionaries to indigenous diocesan clergy in all the dioceses within the space of a few decades. At present there are 4,116 priests available for pastoral care in a total of 1,511 parishes; there are 1,403 students at seminaries training for the priesthood. The communities are distinguished by lively activity and a high level of social engagement expressed in hospice and visiting services. According to statistics from the Korean Bishops' Conference, more than 25 per cent of registered Catholics are active in parish life – an impression that was confirmed to me during Sunday Mass.

The Church in Korea witnessed an enormous surge in membership between 1980 and 1990 along with a tremendous economic boom in society. Yet despite the growth in members, the number of Catholics taking an active part in community life declined constantly ('cold believers'). Eventually only eight percent of Catholics were taking part in community life. At that point the then President of the Korean Bishops' Conference and the Archbishop of Seoul, Cardinal Stephen Kim, looked for ways to revitalise Church life. As part of a new pastoral plan he introduced Small Christian Communities into the Archdiocese of Seoul in 1992. Today there are some 20 000 Small Christian Communities in the Archdiocese of Seoul alone, which has 1.3 million Catholics. The regular meetings, particularly in new housing areas, bring Catholics together who did not know each other before. The parish priests I visited told me unanimously that they regard the SCCs as a pillar of the community, even though about two thirds of the community members do not join these organisations. Theoretically, however, every Catholic

in a parish is assigned to an SCC, since this is linked to the civil and ecclesiastical organisation of the 'ban' (neighbourhood, district), which existed in Korea before the SCCs were introduced. The Korean bishops told me that the communities had become livelier since the SCCs were introduced. SCCs have contributed to a deepening of spiritual life for Catholics in Korea, above and beyond their actual structure and method. An obvious consequence of Bible sharing, according to the Korean bishops, is that individual Christians become 'more articulate' about their own faith and are thereby enabled to lead a more strongly missionary existence. The SCCs support and insist on the Church's social caring commitment to society. The Korean situation shows that Small Christian Communities contribute to the renewal of community life where they are part of community pastoral activity and are integrated into it. Discussion about faith and reading the Bible together in the predetermined context of the parish and diocese strengthens the Christians in their faith. It is certainly also appropriate in Germany to look for ways of guiding community members to more experience of faith and facilitating more encounters with Christ. This is the essential task of all Church activity. How can we – even without the cultural weight of the neighbourhood 'ban' – guide people to more community in Christ?

### **"Ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ"**

Those who share the Bible together in the right sense also share faith in Jesus Christ, indeed share Christ Himself. St. Hieronymus is quoted as saying "Ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ". According to the Catholic understanding, God's Word is written in the Bible. The Bible is the written form of the Word of God, which became flesh in Jesus. Scripture read in association with the Church opens the way to Christ. In this sense, Benedict XVI speaks in the Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini* about making biblical pastoral activity the very heart of all pastoral activity. This means highlighting the central position of the Word of God as the gate to Christ in Church life. Through the Bible we gain a greater awareness of the person of Christ, "who reveals the Father and is the fullness of divine revelation."<sup>29</sup> Small Christian Communities can help to deepen and

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<sup>29</sup> VD 73.

support our relationship with Jesus. Where they do this, they are an important prop in building the community and the Church. Benedict XVI rightly points out that Small Christian Communities cannot mean that additional groups emerge in communities and dioceses and that Bible pastoral activity moves in alongside proper pastoral activity, as it were. Rather the whole Church must be concerned to seek and deepen the encounter with Christ at all levels, the path to which is opened up by the Gospel.

Hans Jorissen, the Bonn dogmatist who died last year, formulated his pastoral understanding at the end of his life in three simple steps. What does a Christian need to survive as a Christian? Personal prayer, shared celebration of Sunday Mass and regular conversation about faith with believers. In this sense Small Christian Communities can contribute significantly to creating the kind of space in which believers can talk to each other about their faith and do so with immediate reference to Holy Scripture and Christ Himself. This will automatically lead to a commitment to “God’s Kingdom of justice, peace and joy” for all people.<sup>30</sup> The major concern of Small Christian Communities is to facilitate the personal discipleship of Christ in the context of Church and community, which must increasingly find space in ecclesiastical performance if missionary renewal is to happen. What we need to do is re-discover the authentic discipleship of Christ made possible through the Gospel as a modern ecclesiastical ‘cross-cutting task’. The universal Church impetus which derives from the encounter with Small Christian Communities in Asia or Africa can be a valuable motivation for us to do likewise in Germany.

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<sup>30</sup> Cf. Romans 14,17.

# Ecclesial Base Communities: A Look Back and a Look Forward

Pablo Richard Guzmán

## **Foundational texts in the tradition of the ecclesial base community in the Church of Latin America and the Caribbean**

This article considers only the key passages, those dealing specifically with ecclesial base communities (*Comunidades Eclesiales de Base* or CEBs), that are to be found in the concluding documents of the General Conferences of Latin American Bishops at Medellín (1968), Puebla (1979), Santo Domingo (1992) and, most recently, Aparecida (2007). In this tradition we encounter the historical memory of the ecclesial base communities on our continent.

### **Medellín Conference (1968):**

“The Christian base community is the first and fundamental nucleus of the Church. At its own level it is responsible for the spread of the faith and of the worship that is its expression. It is the initial cell of the ecclesial structure and the centre of evangelization, and it is at present a fundamental factor of human advancement and development.”<sup>31</sup>

### **Puebla Conference (1979):**

“The ecclesial base communities that in 1968 were hardly more than a fledgling experiment have since multiplied and matured, especially in certain countries, and are reason for joy and hope for the Church. In communion with the bishops, and as called for by

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<sup>31</sup> Conference of Latin American Bishops (CELAM), *The Church in the Present Day Transformation of Latin America in the Light of the Catholic Bishops' Conference* (Washington DC: National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1970), 226 (translation modified).

Medellín, they have become centres of evangelization and motors of liberation and development.”<sup>32</sup>

“The vitality of these ecclesial base communities is beginning to bear fruit. They have been one of the sources for the increase in lay ministers, who are now acting as leaders and organizers of these communities, as catechists, and as missionaries.”<sup>33</sup>

“The ecclesial base communities create better interpersonal relationships, acceptance of God’s Word, reflection about life and reality in light of the Bible: in the communities, the commitment to family, work, the neighbourhood and the local community are strengthened. This form of ecclesial life is found more commonly in the countryside and on the periphery of the great cities. These represent an environment particularly favourable to the emergence of new forms of lay service and they have seen the wide dissemination of forms of family catechesis and faith education for adults more appropriate to simple people.”<sup>34</sup>

“As a *community*, the Ecclesial Base Community brings together families, adults and young people in an intimate interpersonal relationship in the faith. As *ecclesial*, it is a community of faith, hope, and charity; it celebrates the Word of God in life through solidarity and through commitment to the Lord’s new commandment; and through the service of approved coordinators it makes present and effective the mission of the Church and its own unambiguous communion with the Church’s rightful pastors. It is a *base community*, because it is constituted of a few members, in permanent form, as one cell of the greater community. “When they are worthy of their qualification as ecclesial, then they are able to lead a distinctive spiritual and human life of their own, in fraternal solidarity (EN 58)”<sup>35</sup>

<sup>32</sup> CELAM, Puebla: La Evangelización en el presente y en el futuro de América Latina / Tercera Conferencia General del Episcopado Latinoamericano [1979], San Salvador 1985, No. 96; translated into English as Third General Conference of Latin American Bishops, Puebla: Evangelization at Present and in the Future of Latin America, Conclusions, St Paul Publications 1980. [translation of relevant passage modified].

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. No. 97.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. No. 629 [translation modified].

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. No. 641 [translation modified]. The emphasis here and elsewhere is the author’s.

“The *Ecclesial Base Communities* are the expression of the Church’s preferential love for the simple people; in them, their religiosity is expressed, valued and purified, and there they are given the chance to participate in the work of the Church and in the commitment to transform the world”.<sup>36</sup>

### **Santo Domingo Conference (1992):**

“The parish, a community of communities and movements.”

“The parish, an organic and missionary communion, is a network of communities.”

“The base communities are the living cells of the parish.”

“We think it necessary to reaffirm the validity of the Ecclesial Base Communities...”<sup>37</sup>

### **Aparecida Conference (2007):**

“In the ecclesial experience of some churches of Latin America and the Caribbean, basic (base) ecclesial communities have been schools that have helped form Christians committed to their faith, disciples and missionaries of the Lord, as is attested by the generous commitment of so many of their members, even to the point of shedding their blood. They return to the experience of the early communities as described in the Acts of the Apostles (cf. Acts 2:42-47). Medellín recognized in them an initial cell for building the Church and a focal point of faith and evangelization. Puebla noted that small communities, especially basic ecclesial communities, enable the people to have access to greater knowledge of the Word of God, social commitment in the name of the Gospel, the emergence of new lay services, and education of the faith of adults”.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. No. 643.

<sup>37</sup> These are extracts from CELAM, *Nueva evangelización, promoción humana, cultura cristiana*, Santafé de Bogotá, 1992, Nos 58-64; available in English as: *New Evangelization, Human Development, Christian Cultures*, trans. Phillip Berryman, Washington DC 1993.

<sup>38</sup> CELAM, *Documento conclusivo de la V Conferencia General del Episcopado Latinoamericano y del Caribe*, Bogota, Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano, 2007; published in English as *Concluding Document, Aparecida*, Bogota, Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano, 2008.

“In following Jesus as missionaries, ecclesial base communities have the Word of God as the fount of their spirituality and the guidance of their Pastors to ensure communion with the Church. They deploy their evangelizing and missionary commitment among the humblest and most marginalized and are a visible expression of the preferential option for the poor. [...] Maintaining communion with their bishops and participating in the overall thrust of diocesan pastoral activity, ecclesial base communities have become a sign of vitality in the particular churches. By acting in conjunction with parish groups, associations, and ecclesial movements, they can help revitalize parishes, making them a community of communities. In their effort to meet the challenges of the contemporary age, ecclesial base communities will take care not to alter the precious treasure that is the Tradition and Magisterium of the Church”.<sup>39</sup>

“As a response to the demands of evangelization, there are in addition to the *ecclesial base communities* other valid forms of small community, among them networks of communities, of movements, of groups living, praying and reflecting together on the Word of God. All ecclesial communities and groups will yield fruit insofar as the Eucharist stands at the centre of their lives, and the Word of God serves as a beacon for their journey and their activity in the one Church of Christ”.<sup>40</sup>

Elsewhere in the Aparecida Document (Nos. 308-310), other *small ecclesial communities* are discussed: “They are a favourable setting for hearing the Word of God [...] a solid spirituality, based on the Word of God, to keep them in full communion of life and ideals with the local church, and with the parish in particular; [...] the processes for forming small communities must be reinvigorated in our continent, for in them we have a sure source of vocations to the priesthood, the religious life, and the lay apostolate”.<sup>41</sup>

In the Aparecida Document, these “small ecclesial communities” are *distinguished* from ecclesial base communities and represented as an *alternative* to them.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. No. 179.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid. No. 180.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid. Nos. 308-310.

### A thematic synopsis of the texts

At Medellín in 1968, a first definition of the base community is offered:

- “first and fundamental *nucleus of the church*”
- “initial cell of the *ecclesiastical structures*”
- “focus of *evangelization*”
- “currently the most important source of human advancement and development”

Puebla, 1979:

- “centres of *evangelization* and moving forces for *liberation and development*”
- “source of *lay ministries*”
- “*Word of God*”
- “on the *periphery* of the great cities and in the *countryside*”
- “*new forms of lay service*”
- “the *Word of God* in life”
- “*cell* of the greater community”
- “qualification as *ecclesial*”
- “*the Church’s preferential love for the simple people*”

Santo Domingo, 1992:

- “the parish as *community of communities and movements*”
- “the parish as *network of communities*”
- “*living cells* of the parish”

Aparecida, 2007:

- “*schools* helping to form Christian disciples and missionaries of the Lord”
- “generous commitment of so many of their members, even to the point of *shedding their blood*”
- “*early communities* as described in the Acts of the Apostles (cf. Acts 2:42-47)”
- “*initial cell* for building the Church”
- “*focal point* of faith and evangelization”
- “greater knowledge of the *Word of God*”
- “the *Word of God* as the fount of their spirituality”
- “visible expression of the *preferential option for the poor*”
- “a sign of vitality in the *particular churches*”
- “*community of communities*”

***Negative aspects: anxieties, suspicions and criticisms regarding ecclesial base communities***

Severe criticisms are to be found in some texts about the base communities. The prevailing mood is one of anxiety and suspicion. Not everything is positive.

Puebla, 1979:

“It is regrettable that, in some areas, clearly political interests try to *manipulate them* [base communities] and *sever them* from authentic communion with their bishops”<sup>42</sup>

“[...] insofar as the Church is a historical, institutional People, it represents the broader, more universal, and better defined structure in which the life of the CEBs must be inscribed if they are not to fall prey to the *danger of organizational anarchy or narrow-minded sectarian elitism* (cf. EN 58)”<sup>43</sup>

“Some aspects of the whole problem of the ‘*people’s Church*’ (*Iglesia popular*) or of ‘*parallel magisteria*’ fit in here. A *sect* always tends towards self-sufficiency on both the juridical and doctrinal levels. Integrated into the whole People of God, *the CEBs will undoubtedly avoid such dangers* and will measure up to the hopes that the Latin American Church has placed in them”<sup>44</sup>

“*The problem of the ‘people’s Church,’ the Church born of the People, has various aspects. The first obstacle is readily surmounted if it is interpreted as a Church that is trying to incarnate itself in the ranks of the common people on this continent, and that therefore arises out of their response in faith to the Lord. This rules out the seeming denial of a basic truth: i.e., that the Church always arises from a first initiative ‘from above,’ from the Spirit who raises it up and from the Lord who convokes it. Nevertheless, the appellation seems to be quite unfortunate. The ‘people’s Church’ seems to be something distinct from some ‘other’ Church – the latter being identified with the ‘official’ or ‘institutional’ Church and accused of*

<sup>42</sup> Third General Conference of Latin American Bishops, Puebla, Evangelization at Present and in the Future of Latin America, Conclusions, Slough 1980, No. 96.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid. No. 261.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid. Nos. 192 and 262.

*being 'alienating'. This suggests a division within the bosom of the Church and seems to imply an unacceptable denial of the hierarchy's function. As John Paul II indicated, such views could well be inspired by 'familiar ideological forms of conditioning' (Opening Address: I.8).<sup>45</sup>*

*"[...] Perhaps that is why not a few members of certain communities, and even entire communities, have been drawn to purely lay institutions or have been turned into ideological radicals and are now in the process of losing any authentic feel for the Church".<sup>46</sup>*

Santo Domingo, 1992:

*"[...] communities cease being ecclesial and may fall victim to ideological or political manipulation".<sup>47</sup>*

Aparecida, 2007:

*"Puebla noted that...not a few members of certain communities, and even entire communities, had been drawn to purely lay institutions or had been turned into ideological radicals, and were in the process of losing any authentic feel for the Church".<sup>48</sup>*

### **The reasons for these suspicions and criticisms, and some of their consequences**

The Medellín Document was much criticised. The fiercest criticisms came from within CELAM itself, dominated since 1973 by Don Alfonso López Trujillo, its General Secretary and organiser of the Puebla Conference. The great argument, endlessly repeated, was that Medellín had been misinterpreted and that the Puebla Conference had to correct these false interpretations. Yet Puebla did not bring about the desired rectification. In many respects, Puebla made more explicit

<sup>45</sup> Ibid. Nos 192-193, 263.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid. No. 630.

<sup>47</sup> CELAM, Nueva evangelización, No. 62, cited in: Hennely, A., Santo Domingo Documents and Commentaries from the Fourth General Conference of Latin American Bishops, New York 1993.

<sup>48</sup> CELAM, Documento conclusivo de la V Conferencia General, No. 178, cited from the English version.

what had been said in Medellín. Nevertheless, the argument regarding the misinterpretation of Medellín had a long life in conservative circles. CELAM waged a continent-wide campaign of denunciation against the base communities and liberation theology, accusing them of politicizing the Church and of deploying Marxism in theological reflection.<sup>49</sup> This anxiety was particularly notable in the 1980s, which saw the publication of two Instructions by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith: *Libertatis Nuntius* in 1984, followed by *Libertatis Conscientia* in 1986. There arose the suspicion that the theology of liberation was influenced by Marxist theory. All these anxieties, suspicions and denunciations had very negative effects, for they contributed to a significant extent to the death of thousands of Christians, above all in Central America.

## Theological reflection on ecclesial base communities

### *The ecclesiological ground of the ecclesial base communities*

The ecclesial base community is the *root and basis* of the institutional Church itself, and more directly of the local church, organised as diocese and parishes. And within this structure of diocese and parishes, the base community has its own “proper ecclesiality.” The local church in all its instances is confronted by an inescapable theological-pastoral duty to *reconstruct its basic structure, its roots as an institution*. Without the base communities, the whole body of the Church (trunk, branches, flowers and fruits) is threatened. The Church has both “charismatic” and “sacramental” dimensions, the first of which may be more transient, the second more permanent. It is among the charisms that we may situate the “small Christian communities,” while the base communities occupy a more sacramental position, for they contain *in nuce* all that which will be the Church: Word, worship, service, community and mission. When a “small community” disappears, there goes with it a “charism” or a “ministry,” but the disappearance of an ecclesial base community represents the loss of the root, of the structural basis of the Church itself. This is why the exclusion of the *ecclesial* base communities has meant a *disintegration* of the very ecclesiality of the Church. That is the significance

<sup>49</sup> See for example: Comblin, J., As grandes incertezas na Igreja atual, in: Revista Eclesiástica Brasileira 265, 2007, 36-58.

of the definitions of the base community as “first and fundamental nucleus of the church,” “initial cell of the ecclesiastical structures,” “living cell of the parish,” “sign of vitality in the particular churches,” and of the parish as “community of communities”.<sup>50</sup>

### ***The implied Christology of the ecclesial base communities***

In the ecclesial base communities the emphasis falls on the historical Jesus, the humanity of Jesus, his plan for a Reign of God, discipleship, and other Christological themes central to the four Gospels. As the Aparecida Document notes, “*The preferential option for the poor is one of the distinguishing features of our Latin American and Caribbean church* (No. 391) . . . If this option is implicit in *Christological faith*, we Christians as disciples and missionaries are called to contemplate, in the suffering faces of our brothers and sisters, the face of Christ who calls us to serve Him in them: ‘*The suffering faces of the poor are suffering faces of Christ.*’ They question the core of the Church’s action, its ministry, and our Christian attitudes. *Everything having to do with Christ has to do with the poor, and everything connected to the poor cries out to Jesus Christ* (No. 393).”

### ***The Church defined as the People of God***

We have now considered the most important ecclesiological aspects of the ecclesial base communities. Important, too, is their commitment to the *model of the Church* defined at the Second Vatican Council and at Medellín: *the Church as the People of God*. At the Extraordinary Synod of 1985, Cardinal Ratzinger proposed replacing the notion of the “Church as People of God” with that of “Church as communion.” The definition of the Church as the People of God was said to be rather sociological, the proposed “Church as communion” more theological. The basic intention was to recover the “divine” dimension of the Church as “communion with God” while rejecting its historical dimension as “People of God.” This was to propose a “divine” image of the Church, in which there could be no contradiction or conflict. In a Church thus spiritualized the real history of the Church and its sins against others and itself are all forgotten and critical analysis is rendered impossible.

<sup>50</sup> On this, see the extracts from key documents cited above.

### ***The preferential option for the poor and the ecclesial base communities***

The ecclesial base community as the fundamental element and root of the parish made it possible for the poor to participate in the Church together with other socially excluded groups. Analogously, the CEB has been a privileged site for the participation of lay men and women. The CEBs were an important presence in poor and marginal neighbourhoods and thus reached much further into the world of the poor. This is why, at Aparecida, they were said to be a “visible expression of the *preferential option for the poor*.”

### ***The base communities: an ecclesial space of greater autonomy within the Church***

The base community creates a space of greater autonomy, freedom and creativity *within* the institutional Church. One within which liberation theology finds itself renewed and further developed. The base communities have no church, no chapel, meeting generally in private houses and other “unsacred” places. They continue to attend church and their leaders, in particular, faithfully maintain their religious practice within the parish, though without giving up their space of autonomy within the Church. It is difficult to identify members of the base communities involved in the customary practices of the parish. The base communities hold in great respect the local magisterium of their pastors, but particular value is attached to the *sensus fidelium*, the sense of the faith that is given as a gift from God to the faithful. Among the baptized the base communities are concerned more with the formation of missionaries than with the ordinary ministers of parish administration. Their mysticism and operative capacity are rooted in the *community-mission* couple. *The Church in the base communities is not clerical*, but fiercely committed to the development of lay men and women so that they may be capable of taking on the mission of the Church. The activists of the base communities cannot be the official leaders of the parish. The latter are mainly engaged in maintaining existing structures and services and do not have the vision, time or availability to construct a new ecclesial model in the marginal and excluded sectors of their parish areas.

### ***The spirituality of the base communities***

The base communities are chiefly concerned not with the problems of the Church as an institution, but rather with an on-going spiritual quest. *Where is the People? Where is God? Where are we? Where should we be as a Church?* The spirituality of those participating in the base communities is found in the experience of God *in human and social life, in the quest for God in human history and in the natural world*, rather than in the cultic and sacramental life of the more established parishes. It may be best summed up in the well-known saying of St. Irenaeus: "The glory of God is the living human being, the glory of being human is the vision of God" (*Gloria Dei vivens homo, gloria autem hominis visio Dei*). The spirituality lived by the base communities is developed through "prayerful reading of the Bible" or "Lectio Divina." This confronts us with five questions. What does the biblical text say? What does it say to *us*? How does the biblical text become the Word of God? What is our response to the Word? And what does it mean, in my life, to hear the Word of God? Another common approach within the base communities is the old method of See, Judge, Act, Evaluate and Celebrate.

### ***Biblical texts that have inspired the emergence of the ecclesial base communities***

*A number of Old Testament texts*, in particular the Book of Exodus, the Prophets and the Psalms, generally read from the prophetic perspective of the poor and the excluded.

#### **In the New Testament**

A foundational text is Acts 2, 42-45: "These remained faithful to the teaching of the apostles, to the brotherhood, to the breaking of bread and to the prayers. And everyone was filled with awe; the apostles worked many signs and miracles. And all who shared the faith owned everything in common; they sold their goods and possessions and distributed the proceeds among themselves according to what each one needed."

"The whole group of believers was united, heart and soul; no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, as everything they owned was held in common." (Acts 4, 32)

“None of their members was ever in want, as all those who owned land or houses would sell them, and bring the money from the sale of them, to present it to the apostles; it was then distributed to any who might be in need.” (Acts 4, 34-35)

A form of life that could be summed up as: Each gave according to his or her abilities, each received according to his or her needs, and there were no poor among them.

The base communities also used to value the particular form of the “house church,” as is described, for example, in the First Epistle to the Corinthians: “Aquila and Prisca send their best wishes in the Lord, together with the church that meets in their house.”

#### Current arguments within the Church over the actual or possible future of the base communities

The world has changed radically since the 1990s. It is no longer the world that gave us the Second Vatican Council and the Medellín Conference. Even in the 1980s, after Puebla (1979) and the beginning of the pontificate of John Paul II, the Church was beginning to move backwards. The Church turned in on itself, the parish was again the centre of worship and sacrament, and the memory of the past was lost. The appointment of bishops and the training of priests took a more conservative turn. The power of the hierarchy was reinforced and with it the exclusion of laymen and women. In the new ecclesiastical context the base communities were marginalized and forgotten. The most tragic result is that the Church has lost the poor, handing them over to the Pentecostal and Evangelical churches. In marginal urban neighbourhoods and the countryside there are today more than ten non-Catholic churches to each Catholic church. In this context, the question again arises: Is there a future for the base communities?

The period since the Aparecida Conference in 2007 has seen a *revival of the base communities*. This has essentially been driven by the movement “Lectura Popular de la Biblia” (Popular Bible Reading) and programmes of lay formation. There is a major involvement in the social movements of women, youth, indigenous peoples, blacks, landless peasants, those of different sexualities, and in defence of the environment. This whole process of renewal has been accompanied by a diversification of the theology of liberation, with the emergence

of indigenous, black, environmental and gender theologies. This is a theology that begins a dialogue with modernity, with the secular and post-modern world, which finds sustenance in dialogue with the social sciences, and in particular with economics. A new world has been born with the decolonization of Christianity and dialogue with other religions, for instance at the World Social Forum, which declared that “another world is possible.” A new model of communication and expression has emerged with real and virtual networks at the local and continental level. It is not an age of “elephants” but of “ants.” It is not an age of major institutional, social or ecclesiastical ruptures, but one for the creation of new spaces, with a new legitimacy, authority, autonomy, freedom and creativity. Unnecessary confrontations should be avoided within the Church, which must grow from its strengths. The future of the Church lies not in the hands of clerics but in those of the laity. While Pope Pius XI in his day declared that the great scandal of the 20th century was the Church’s loss of the working class, we now can say that the great scandal of the early third millennium is the Church’s exclusion of women and its massive abandonment of the poor and the excluded. At the ideological level, the problem is not Marxism but neo-liberalism, which is much more dangerous than all earlier ideologies. The Church has not confronted neo-liberalism as it did Marxism.

## Conclusion

A successful future for the base communities lies not in their being numerous but in their being different (the problem is not quantitative but qualitative). The base communities have the capacity to create an institutional space of autonomy, legitimacy and freedom inside the Church. This space presupposes a reconstruction of its basis as an institution. The ecclesial base community is the “*first and fundamental nucleus of the church*” and the “*initial cell of the ecclesiastical structures*” (Medellín 1968). The crisis currently faced by the Church does not call for the strengthening of the power of the hierarchy but the reconstruction of its basis as an institution. Its problem is not “up above” but “down below.” The crisis of the Church could prove to be irreversible if it is not capable of reconstructing its base, its foundation, its institutional root. Reliable statistics indicate that the Catholic Church has lost 30 million faithful over the past ten

years. But the problem is not only quantitative but qualitative. Those who have left the Church are more particularly the poor, the excluded, the women, the lay people, the better intellectuals and the youth, to whom the Church “says almost nothing at all.” In many of the secular universities of Latin America eighty per cent are no longer members of the Catholic Church. The hierarchical Church can offer massive demonstrations of power in stadiums and streets and in controlling popular religion, but this does not signify any solution to its institutional crisis. There is a model of the Church that seeks to survive on the money and authority of the powerful. But we cannot forget those millions of the poor and excluded who need the Church if they are to survive. When the poor suffer, prophets are a necessity. The future of the ecclesial base communities will lie in their ability to meet these challenges.

# **Small Christian Communities and Spirituality**



# Small Christian Communities / Basic Ecclesial Communities

Nicodème Kalonji Ngoyi

## **Definition, duties and attributes of the Communautés Ecclésiales Vivantes de Base (CEVB; Vibrant Basic Ecclesial Communities)<sup>51</sup>**

### **Definition**

The Bishops' Conference of the Democratic Republic of the Congo defined the Communautés Ecclésiales Vivantes de Base (CEVB), or Vibrant Basic Ecclesial Communities, hereinafter referred to as *Basic Ecclesial Communities*, as follows: "A group of Christians consisting of believers from the same location or milieu. This is organised in order to permit sharing and to practise solidarity; it is achieved by listening to the Word of God, through prayer, breaking of bread together, apostolate and the acceptance of responsibility for the immediate environment."<sup>52</sup>

It follows that the Basic Ecclesial Community is:

- a) an effective means to integrate the 'Church as Family of God' within daily life, to safeguard continuous reciprocal evangelisation, strengthen the missionary spirit and facilitate inculturation and commitment in one's immediate surroundings;
- b) a framework permitting each individual to put the gifts of the Holy Spirit, received during baptism and confirmation, to good use in order to deepen one's own faith and perform

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<sup>51</sup> Directoire de la pastorale des Communautés Ecclésiales Vivantes de Base, Kinshasa 2005, 17-28.

<sup>52</sup> Nouvelle évangélisation et catéchèse dans la perspective d'une Eglise Famille de Dieu en Afrique, Instruction à l'usage des agents de l'évangélisation et de la catéchèse en RDC, Kinshasa 2000, 41-42.

tasks and services according to one's abilities which satisfy the needs of the community inhabiting a specific residential area;

- c) a place in which the message of the Gospel is inculturated and reaches people deep in their hearts;
- d) a framework which facilitates a new way in which to exercise power and authority;
- e) a framework in which Christians endeavour to live the concept of spiritual and material sharing established by the early Christians in order to collectively solve the various interpersonal problems with which they are confronted.

#### ***Duties of the Basic Ecclesial Community***

- a) The establishment of a fraternal community in which each individual feels supported in his or her own faith and everyone helps one another and sets examples of Christian hope and charity through their good witness;
- b) The continuation of the mission of Jesus Christ, which comprises the proclamation of the Good News (Luke 4:18f.), in order to transform the world into the Kingdom of God;
- c) The exaltation of baptism as the foundation of the Christian faith and gateway to the Church, which bestows upon all individuals equal value as children of God, lends them all the same holiness and invests each one with the same mission, namely the evangelisation of the world;
- d) The performance of the prophetic, priestly and kingly offices incumbent upon the people of God as a whole in their relationship with the world;
- e) The facilitation and enablement of the participation and co-responsibility of the laity in the life and mission of the Church;
- f) The Basic Ecclesial Communities are required to assist their members in order to help them:
  - participate, in accordance with their abilities, so that they can analyse the circumstances and events in their spheres

of life and ask themselves the great questions of contemporary life in the light of the Word of God;

- gain awareness of the fact that they share a common destiny and involve themselves in community campaigns geared towards an improvement in living conditions, community transformation and the coming of the Kingdom of God;
- perform a prophetic role in society by preaching the Word of God, denounce injustice (or contribute to its denunciation), serve the needy and advocate the creation of a society whose values equate more closely to those of the Kingdom of God.

#### ***Attributes of the Basic Ecclesial Community***

- a) At a sociological level it is a community of fraternal charity.
- b) At a theological level it is a community which
  - listens to the Word of God,
  - lives its faith,
  - reads the signs of the times,
  - is committed to professing its faith.

#### **The Basic Ecclesial Communities are a way to a 'Communion with God'<sup>53</sup>**

God is One and Triune: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Community members simultaneously discover that this God did not create man as a solitary being: "male and female he created them" (Genesis 1:27). This union of man and woman is the primal expression of fellowship between two individuals, as human beings share a deep social nature, making them unable to live or develop their unique gifts without interpersonal relationships. This two-fold realisation which is, in essence, the awareness of two sides of the same coin, makes the Basic Ecclesial Community a theological stronghold.

The symbolism of the 'way' evokes the image of an obstacle course. For God's will may, indeed, encounter obstacles and resistance. It is not

<sup>53</sup> The term Dieu-communion (Communion with God) was coined by Abbot José Moko at the "Conference on the Spirituality of Communion in CEVB Communities" at the Diocesan Congress of Basic Ecclesial Communities in Kinshasa 2005.

surprising that some people evade community life and relationships with others. Community life is by no means a sure-fire success.<sup>54</sup> The community is a place where our limits and egotism emerge for all to see. As a result, it is entirely understandable that some inhabitants of a residential area, including committed Catholics, reject the idea of joining the community. Placing clear emphasis on these forms of resistance helps bring to the fore the concept of the progressive path with its 'procession of patience'. Although highly recommended, the Basic Ecclesial Community is unable to unite all individuals, i.e. the entire residential area.

A fleeting reference to the difficulties and crises which the Early Church had to face suffices to demonstrate that 'the Community' is by no means an ideal which is easy to realise, should this indeed be necessary. There is nothing finer than a community in which people truly start loving one another. In this respect it is important to consider practical details in order to ensure that the leaders of the Basic Ecclesial Communities, known as 'Bayangeli', their deputies and the core team ('Noyau') are able to fulfil the tasks assigned to them. It follows that the community must be the place where people feel that their limitations and abilities are accepted. Only then will it become a sanctuary of life and growth.

That said, the Basic Ecclesial Communities are just one of many ways to reach God. The Basic Ecclesial Community, which is required to coexist with people of other faiths and religious persuasions within the neighbourhood, must bond with other spiritual paths, spreading the seed of love, which promotes openness as opposed to reticence. The Community's accessible nature constitutes the very essence of its presence in the neighbourhood. As an alternative to violence and intolerance, the Basic Ecclesial Community aims to bear witness to the living God, who is the father of us all.

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<sup>54</sup> One source of inspiration was Jean Vanier who transferred the community ideal of the Early Church to his L'Arche communities. See: Vanier, J., *La Communauté, Lieu du pardon et de la fête*, Paris 1979; English translation *Community and Growth*, Paul & Co, revised edition, 1999.

## **The Basic Ecclesial Communities are real ‘families’ with strong Christian leanings<sup>55</sup>**

When Cardinal Malula urged the parishes to create communities tailored to the individual, he had in mind the joy of those who feel part of a family community. After being encouraged to strengthen the spirit of openness in previous years, it was now time for the Basic Ecclesial Communities to focus on the equally accessible ‘family’ dimension. As stated earlier, this openness extends beyond the circle of members of the Basic Ecclesial Community, whose open-heartedness is indicative of the universal nature of God’s love. In addition to this continued openness, which pertains to all inhabitants of a residential area, the specific need for brotherhood between members simultaneously remains. The incitement by the Early Church to share possessions equally so that no one need suffer if they lack the basic necessities should give the Basic Ecclesial Communities food for thought. The pertinent question at this juncture is how to create a sense of belonging which allows members of the Basic Ecclesial Communities to nourish themselves from the bond of brotherhood uniting them and to internalise this unity to an extent which prompts them to meet other members’ needs.

A community achieves a high level of internalisation when the majority of members makes the transition from ‘the community for me’ to ‘me for the community’; i.e. when each member opens his or her heart to the other members without excluding anyone. This constitutes the shift from egotism to love, and from death to resurrection. A community is not a shared flat or a work team, still less a vipers’ nest! The love lived here is neither a feeling nor a fleeting emotion. Love is mindfulness of others, which gradually develops into firm commitment; an accepted bond, an affinity.

## **The foundation text of the Basic Ecclesial Communities: Acts 2:42-47 – sharing and solidarity**

This excerpt from Acts has formed the subject of countless studies. The results of three such studies are described below.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Abbé José Moko, *ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> Dupont, J., *Nouvelles études sur les Actes des Apôtres*, Paris 1984; Bossuyt. P. /

Let us first address the study by Jacques Dupont. He suggests reading the three excerpts regarding the Early Church together, namely Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-35 and 5:12-16, in order to gain an overall impression of the community life led by the early Christians. He reaches the following conclusions:

1. Luke transfers the Greek ideal of friendship to the community which has formed in Jerusalem, yet is careful not to present the Christians as mere friends. They fulfil the friendship ideal as “believers” (Acts 2:44; 4:32; 5:14). The foundation of their conviction to share everything is not formed by friendship but by their mutual faith. Incidentally, this faith is linked inextricably with their common hope (2:47). Mutual faith and common hope constitute the very foundation of their unity. They understand that they form a community of faith.
2. This unity must be lived. It finds initial expression in their unanimous convictions: “The whole group of believers was united, heart and soul” (4:32). This phrase is close to the adverb *ομοθυμαδον*, which is used to express the unanimity of sentiment shared by believers as recounted in the Acts of the Apostles 2:46 and 5:12. The expression *epi to auto*, which usually means ‘together’, appears to have been used in an extremely emphatic manner in verses 2:44 and 2:47. Unanimity makes its most compelling appearance when the believers meet before God in the temple (2:46; 5:12) or pray together (1:14; 4:24). In this context, it is useful to recall that, in the extremely dense verse 2:42, adherence to the *koinonia* (κοινωνία – community, sharing) is linked closely with the consistent adherence to the teachings of the apostles, on the one hand, and with the breaking of bread and prayer, on the other. A division of the *koinonia*, which is more tangible than the other manifestations of communal Christian life, would not be possible without distortion.

3. The primary spiritual *koinonia* demands ‘embodiment’ or concrete realisation at the level of worldly goods (2:44: “And all who shared the faith owned everything in common”; 4:32: “no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, as everything they owned was held in common”). The *koinonia* would not be authentic if it failed to achieve a parallel development, simultaneously becoming a community of shared property. The position adopted in these excerpts from the Acts of the Apostles does not necessarily result in indifference to worldly goods or an ideal of poverty.

The motivation for sharing one’s possessions with others is not to be poor but to ensure that poverty does not spread to other members of the community. This explanation can be found in the book of Deuteronomy, chapter 15, verses 4-5: “There must, then, be no poor among you. For Yahweh will grant you his blessing [...], only if you pay careful attention to the voice of Yahweh your God.”

It follows that a community worthy of the name cannot exist if some of its members live in abundance while others lack life’s basic necessities. Here the *koinonia* becomes a concrete embodiment of sharing in order to ensure that all its members have what they require to live.

In the second study the authors, Philippe Bossuyt and Jean Radermakers, suggestively advocate forbearance as far as fixation on the practices of ‘communitarianisation’ and the divestiture/division of goods is concerned. Indeed, there are other ways in which to make grace manifest. Later on, Paul talks of his hands earning enough to meet his needs, those of his companions and those of the weak (Acts 20:34-35). A woman from Joppe called Tabitha “never tired of doing good or giving to those in need” (Acts 9:36-39), while Lydia, who was in the purple-dye trade, was more than eager to extend hospitality to Paul and his attendants, urging them to “come and stay with us” (Acts 16:15).

The Holy Spirit suggests countless ways to allow oneself to be pervaded by God’s altruism. According to the authors, Luke recounts the experiences of the community in Jerusalem using the examples of communitarianisation and divestiture/division of goods. One should bear in mind that these two ways of sharing described in the Acts of

the Apostles are rooted in a community which has emerged thanks to the intercession of the Holy Spirit.<sup>57</sup>

Finally, Daniel Marguerat argues that the archetypal Early Church community is immune neither to internal crises (5:1-11; 6:1-6) nor to external attacks (4:1-21; 5:17-40; 6:11-15). The practice of sharing goods described in verse 4:34 was not as widespread as the author of the Acts of the Apostles suggests. Some call it idealisation, others utopia.

The strategy equates to Baudelaire's so-called "pedagogical utopia". Human brotherhood, so difficult to achieve, receives prophetic impetus in the form of the People of the New Covenant, assembled around the apostles, which cannot be checked by the hard realities of life. Luke takes an active role in the endeavours of the third generation of Christians, who overcome conflicts and heresies. However, instead of dwelling on the actual difficulties, he makes a conscious decision in favour of 'optimisation' in his second gospel in order to bolster the communities. He knows that a community without an ideal flounders, loses courage and despairs. As a result, it is useful to bear in mind two phrases used by Luke; firstly the expression used in verse 42, "they continued steadfastly [...]" (or "they devoted themselves eagerly") – ἦσαν δε προσκαρτερουντες – and the time designation "day by day" – καθ ημεραν – in verse 46. This is nothing other than an appropriation of the "resurrection" by contemporary community life.

Luke did not know Jesus personally. The Jesus he discovered was the glorified Saviour whom his master, Paul, had encountered on the road to Damascus, the one in whose countenance he glimpsed the concept of Christian communities, in which the power of his love unfolded, so strong that rich and poor, men and women, sophisticated ladies and lepers alike lived in the same communion. The communion is the glory of the Easter festival, which suffuses the worldly life of the faithful. Luke's Jesus makes the Father, who loves us all, particularly manifest. This love, which moves the father with pity (Luke 15:20), is shared by Jesus (Luke 7:13) and the disciple himself must also show it (Luke 10:33). Like Jesus, the community of the faithful also testifies to the coming of the Kingdom of God through its deeds. The signs

<sup>57</sup> Bossuyt / Rademakers, *ibid.* 194.

heralding and precipitating this kingdom are mindfulness of the poor, the humble and the despised. This is not meant solely as a form of *caritas* towards them, but as a prophetic testimony to communion in an attempt to eradicate the insufferable scourge of poverty. The plea resounds from the courtyards of Israel, which is freed from all forms of servitude: “No poor in your midst.” The prophetic communion of those first Christian communities embodies this mobilisation of powers and means in contemplation of the Kingdom of God.

The author of the Acts of the Apostles is keenly aware of the crises within the community: the deceit of Ananias and Sapphira (5:1-11) or the Choosing of the Seven after the Hellenists revolted against the Hebrews “because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution” (6:1-6). Luke is also aware of the problematic nature of Paul’s classification within the Twelve Apostles. Although he is friends with Paul, he refuses to refer to him as an apostle, a title he reserves solely for the twelve. Cohabitation between Jews and Christians and Gentiles and Christians is discussed at the Council of Jerusalem. In the light of this, one may ask which type of unanimity is referred to in the reports concerning the Early Church. The observation is fitting, quite correct in fact; one could even dismiss Luke’s description of the early days of the Church as pure idealisation. It is, moreover, essential to accept this biblical truth, as the Bible takes reality very seriously. This acknowledgement is the prelude to a communion which is imbued with the defiant power of the resurrection.

Did the first Christians really form a unit, as the expressions ‘together’, ‘one heart and mind’ and ‘in unison’ imply? The fraternal communion or *koinonia* as the fruit of the apostles’ teachings is pursued as an ideal to be achieved. Although this succeeds for a time in places, it is by no means ubiquitous and, above all, inconstant. This observation is advantageous as it encourages rather than discourages. Luke does not intend to promise the earth to readers of the Acts of the Apostles, but rather to motivate them to act on the basis of an ideal. As a result, the ideal is divested of its impossibility and elusiveness thanks to the extraordinary deeds related. In this respect, Barnabas really is the “son of encouragement” (4:36-37), a morale booster for the apostles, whose teachings were designed to lead the community towards *koinonia*.

### **The spirit of communion in the Basic Ecclesial Community<sup>58</sup>**

What is the spirit of communion? On the one hand, it is the ability, in unity with the mystical Body of Christ, to be mindful of one's neighbour in faith, who is thus deemed one of our people, allowing us to share his joys and sorrows, divine his wishes, meet his needs and offer him deep and true friendship.

On the other, it also constitutes the ability to see the positive in one's neighbour, receiving him as he is and appreciating him as a gift from God: a gift for myself and not only for my neighbour, its direct recipient.

Finally, the spirit of communion lies in the ability to accord one's neighbour a place in the community via the mutual bearing of each other's burdens and the rejection of egotistic temptations, which set continual traps in our path and kindle competitive thoughts, careerism, mistrust and envy within us.

This spiritual path should largely protect the communion from external influences, which dwindle, becoming soulless façades, masks of communion as opposed to means of expression and growth in the sense of John Paul II. In sum, it would be like a house built on sand.

### **The challenges faced by the Basic Ecclesial Communities<sup>59</sup>**

The Basic Ecclesial Community as an open community: in a society inclined to self-interest, each community threatens to become a closed circle, clique or consortium: "How wonderful life is here!" – "It was so difficult to become integrated." These communities risk becoming selective, self-sufficient 'retreats for the masses'.

The Church's first challenge at this level is to be a 'refuge' where the lives and hopes of the people unite, which is accessible for all God's sons and daughters and admits all brothers and sisters who knock at its door, particularly if they are suffering or pariahs.

The Basic Ecclesial Community as a religious community: in an ailing and religiously predisposed society the message and structure of

<sup>58</sup> Cappellaro, J.B., *Un peuple s'évangélise*, Cheminement de foi d'un peuple de baptisés, Rome 1996.

<sup>59</sup> *Mission de l'Eglise (Communautés chrétiennes)* no. 123, April 1999.

faith can quickly veer into a type of 'opium for the masses', becoming a remote, ahistorical cult. This may be accompanied by fatalism, passive resignation or magical practices – a type of bargain with God in order to make a profit or gain an advantage.

The second challenge will lie in the release of religious convictions and gospel practices via the Word of God, liberating everything intuitive in the contemplation of God, the God of Life, Christ, who suffers with the suffering in order to make them susceptible to concrete hope, and the Holy Spirit, which emancipates and emboldens, advocating tangibly lived love.

All this occurs in the certainty that, if the God we discover in the sanctuary of the community really is the true and living God, this community must live out its faith tangibly, embedded in real history.

The religious community must also be a compassionate community; it has a prophetic role to play. For the God of the Bible, the one and only God ("I am He who is"), is neither indifferent to suffering nor impervious to injustice. On the contrary, he is a passively committed God, on the side of the suffering and the victims of injustice, in favour of fraternal reconciliation in all equality; a God who shatters the prejudices and breaks down the barriers of individuals and entire groups.

The Basic Ecclesial Community as a missionary community: viewed in the light of the multitudes and of population-related problems, the community is usually very small. The major risk unquestionably lies in the fact that people lose heart and (more or less implicitly) capitulate, abandoning the objective of reaching the majority of the population. On the other hand, parish tradition has a strong tendency to bureaucratise contacts by confining itself to passing on religious instructions and sacramental norms.

Nonetheless, it is also unwise to invite prospective members to participate in community activities immediately. This could be interpreted as proselytising, aimed at expanding the Catholic community as a whole, rather than an attempt to perform services to one's neighbours and nation on the path leading to the kingdom of life.

The third challenge will, therefore, consist in taking the time required to listen to individuals and families, developing a genuine

interest in their problems and discovering their values and religious convictions, this in order to be evangelised and evangelise others from a stance of solidarity and benevolence – with an appropriate word about the Lord’s tenderness and the proximity of Jesus Christ.

The Basic Ecclesial Community as a prophetic community: the all too blatant social injustices and prevalence of the lie also constitute a threat. The community risks turning into a loudly fulminating bevy of individuals or a group of militant advocates of social change. It is possible to lapse into an ideology of faith which reduces the latter to a system of values for social change.

Additionally, the nature of the relationships with people’s organisations and political parties is not always clear-cut. Here the challenge lies in being a prophetic Church in an unconditional manner, freely proclaiming the Gospel in all its heterogeneity and with all its demands; acknowledging the injustices, social falsehoods and collective idolatries; furthermore, levelling prophetic criticism against these same people’s organisations and against the Church itself – with benevolence and from within.

## Conclusion

The Basic Ecclesial Communities transmute the parish into a covenant of communities.<sup>60</sup>

The shift of various aspects of Christian life towards the Basic Ecclesial Communities does not divest the parish of its right to exist – quite the reverse: it gains a new vitality and simultaneously acquires several new functions. The parish becomes a covenant of communities.

- a) It becomes a *place of encounter, communion, exchange and reconciliation*.
- b) It becomes a *place of education and ‘animation’*. Supported by the deanery and the diocese, the parish places various basic and advanced training modules and meetings (particularly the meeting entitled “Service pour un Monde meilleur” [Service for a Better World]) at the disposal of the leaders and members of the Basic Ecclesial Communities, also providing

<sup>60</sup> Directoire de la pastorale des Communautés Ecclésiales Vivantes de Base, *ibid.* 45-46.

them with additional documents and other assistance with their work.

- c) Finally, the parish becomes a *place of mission*. Integrated within the deanery and the diocese, the parish constitutes a 'relay station' for the Basic Ecclesial Communities in terms of major pastoral campaigns and guidelines, which are implemented at this broader, more comprehensive level. Illuminated by the Word of God and catechetical tuition and encouraged by the fraternal exchange and celebration of the sacraments, the Basic Ecclesial Communities anchor their work even more effectively within the larger context of the evangelising mission of the Church as a whole.



# The Spirituality of the Ecclesial Base Communities

Victor Hernández

I think, I feel, that the Kingdom is a relation of EQUALS in which there is no limit to the expression of tenderness... God is tenderness.

The Kingdom belongs to the simple... with no controlling norm,  
with no spiritless legislation... God is freedom.

The Kingdom is the spontaneity of laughing looks and bountiful  
dialogue... God is the laughter of the poor.

The Kingdom is the sharing of silence so that ALL may look, speak,  
feel, cry, laugh, LIVE!! ... God is inclusion.

It is the complicity of stories told through no more than a  
telling look... God is relation.

The Kingdom of God is BEING with people with whom we have  
come into “conflict,” but in the Life that finds expression in the logic  
of RECONCILIATION. God is patience.

## **Spirituality is what motivates us**

I understand spirituality firstly as a mysticism, that is, as the MODE of a person's or group's relation to themselves and others, to Nature and the Other. What motivates, what supports, what characterizes those who share the experience of the small base community? Here I hope to elucidate, through a number of key features, the experience of God enjoyed by men and women, young people and adults through the life of the ecclesial base communities.

By spirituality I understand a distinctive way of bringing Christian and/or human values into a living unity under the perspective of the Kingdom of God. This is a lived synthesis, not necessarily doctrinal or speculative in character, whatever attempts may be made to elaborate theoretically upon spirituality in a properly theological manner.

Spirituality as experience provides the basis for the development of a theology that reflects the spiritual dimension of humanity.<sup>61</sup>

Experience tells us that spirituality is *not* a branch of theology, nor even a field, such as those of doctrine or action. Just as little is it any sort of religion, no matter which. Spirituality is rather a matter of drive [*Aliento*],<sup>62</sup> of what inspires us, gives us strength, urges us on, gives meaning to our lives, and gives us the ability to offer this life as a gift. For me, spirituality is a living synthesis of thought, attitudes and processes in the form of a path or way, a way that always has its beginning where God in the inscrutability of his own ways – full of astonishment and surprise – brings new things into being.

The spirituality to which I refer is that which finds itself in accord with the radical experience of the Incarnation of Him who thought it good to make himself *sarx*, to take on flesh and “sin”:

“We cannot come to know God by way of the metaphysics of being, but only through the history of events. The metaphysics of being strives falsely after transcendental knowledge. The history of events situates us in the reality of the immanent, the only thing of which we can speak of our own knowledge. That is why, to make himself known to us, God became human in Jesus of Nazareth. That is why Jesus is both the Revealer and the Revelation of God. We thus come to know God through the events in the story of Jesus, in his life and acts and words. And so we are able, paradoxically, to know the divine on the basis of the human and so speak of it”.<sup>63</sup>

The hallmark of a spirituality of Christian and ecclesial stamp is that it has as its catalytic core the Church as the mystery of communion

<sup>61</sup> Particularly interesting are accounts of Christian spirituality that emphasize the need to go beyond a spirituality of “distance from the world” or any philosophy or theoretical treatment. I am absolutely convinced that Christian spirituality has to be treated as experience. See: Cunningham, L.S. / Egan, K.J., *Christian Spirituality, Themes from the Tradition*, New York 1996, 21-26.

<sup>62</sup> See: Garibay, I.J, *La espiritualidad de las comunidades eclesiales de base* at <http://elchorote.blogspot.com/2008/03/la-espiritualidad-de-las-comunidades.html> (last retrieved on 27 March 2012).

<sup>63</sup> Castillo, J.M, *La humanización de Dios, Ensayo de cristología*, Madrid 2009, 85.

– *koinonia*.<sup>64</sup> Around this core is organised the whole complex of Christian values as they are to be lived. There thus emerges a particular way of seeing, being and acting as the Church and daring to propose it to the world as the sacrament of the Kingdom. This unique spirituality takes its reference to the Trinity as the non-negotiable emblem of Christian identity (it is the dogma that “suffices” to effect liberation, for the Trinity is a relation between equals in three distinct persons and one single, thriving dialogue). The event of the Trinity is of foundational importance to the Christian identity; in other words, it is the definitive revelation of God, who in Jesus reveals to us the mystery of the Spirit. The Spirit is God’s life, revealed through history as the life and hope of men and women. This Trinitarian experience is proclaimed as the core of the faith and that which gives meaning to Christian life. This kerygmatic proclamation is the foundational symbol in which is condensed the life of the faithful who, confidently abandoning themselves to Jesus’ beloved Father, receive the grace of the Spirit. This is not a spirituality found *within* the Church, as might be a liturgical, biblical or Franciscan spirituality, for example, but one that comprehends all members of the Church (and even those who are not?) in so far as they are part of a whole, of a community called to holiness.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> “The ecclesiology of communion is a central and fundamental concept in the conciliar documents. *Koinonia*-communion, finding its source in Sacred Scriptures, was a concept held in great honour in the early Church and in the Eastern Churches, and this teaching endures to the present day. Much was done by the Second Vatican Council to bring about a clearer understanding of the Church as communion and its concrete application to life. What, then, does this complex word communion mean? Its fundamental meaning speaks of the union with God brought about by Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit. The opportunity for such communion is present in the Word of God and in the Sacraments. Baptism is the door and the foundation of communion in the Church. The Eucharist is the fount and apex of the whole Christian life (cf. LG 11). The Body of Christ in the Holy Eucharist sacramentalizes this communion, that is, it is a sign and actually brings about the intimate bonds of communion among all the faithful in the Body of Christ which is the Church (1 Corinthians 10:16).” The Second Extraordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops (1985), *Ecclesia sub Verbo Dei Mysteria Christi Celebrans pro Salute Mundi, Relatio Finalis*, II.C.1.

<sup>65</sup> “What we propose is the following: that we commit ourselves fundamentally to a spirituality of relationship or communion as a spirituality ‘of’ the Church, with all its consequences; that is to say that all our being and all our pastoral activity should be directed to ensuring that the Church is ‘sign and instrument of communion’ (LG 1). That means that if we are not a community, the Body of Christ, if we do not make visible today the Spirit

### **Ecclesial base communities (CEBs): tradition and novelty**

It is difficult to define the communities that interest us in terms of the process operative in them. I will venture the following, nonetheless: “What is meant by an Ecclesial Base Community is a small group of people whose members know each other, share each others’ lives, celebrate their faith and help each other to live their commitment to the construction of the Kingdom”.<sup>66</sup>

As an historical experience in permanent transformation, the Church is aware of its nature as “pilgrim,” its greatness and its fundamental support, being the Jesus who took on contingency and historicity, becoming shockingly “common.” The Church making its way on foot – without the masonry to support its false securities – is the People of God, which at each historical moment will discover and implement new forms of organisation that help it to embody the values of the Gospel in response to the signs of the times.

*Tradition:* the Ecclesial Base Communities reproduce, in a way, the pastoral *art* of the early Church as well as *certain features* of the first evangelization of Latin America. They seek to be an updated, faithful version of the early Christian communities described in the Acts of the Apostles:

“These remained faithful to the teaching of the apostles, to the brotherhood, to the breaking of bread and to the prayers. [...] And all who shared the faith owned everything in common; they sold their goods and possessions and distributed the proceeds among themselves according to what each one needed” (Acts 2:42, 44-45).

“The whole group of believers was united, heart and soul; no one

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of Jesus, which makes us not only One but different, yet open, appreciative and respectful [...], then everything else that we do, however authentic, generous and just it might appear, may prove in practice be ‘insignificant’ and as such not make visible the union desired by Christ as ‘the sign’ of credibility and fruitfulness (“La Espiritualidad de comunión es la espiritualidad ‘de’ Iglesia,” at <http://blogs.21rs.es/mundomejor/2008/12/11/4-la-espiritualidad-de-comunion-es-la-espiritualidad-de-iglesia> (last retrieved on 27 March 2012).

<sup>66</sup> This attempt at a definition – if, indeed, limits can be imposed on the rich, polyphonic reality represented by the CEBs – is indebted to an article by Fr. Marins at <http://padrepedropierrecebs.blogspot.com/2011/12/vocacion-y-mision-de-las-cebs-equipos.html> (last retrieved on 27 March 2012).

claimed private ownership of any possessions, as everything they owned was held in common. The apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus with great power, and they were all accorded great respect. None of their members was ever in want, as all those who owned land or houses would sell them, and bring the money from the sale of them, to present it to the apostles; it was then distributed to any who might be in need.” (Acts 4:32-35)

*Novelty:* The CEBs are the heirs of the Second Vatican Council, of the Medellín and Puebla Conferences, and of the suppressions of Aparecida<sup>67</sup>.

The Latin American experience of the Ecclesial Base Communities springs from the renewed ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council:

“The Church, at once ‘a visible association and a spiritual community’, goes forward together with humanity and experiences the same earthly lot which the world does. She serves as a leaven and as a kind of soul for human society”<sup>68</sup>

And Paul VI would write, ten years later, that the base communities “appear and develop, almost without exception, within the Church, having solidarity with her life, being nourished by her teaching and united with her pastors. ...they spring from the need to live the Church’s life more intensely, or from the desire and quest for a more human dimension such as larger ecclesial communities can only offer with difficulty, especially in the big modern cities which lend themselves both to life in the mass and to anonymity. [...] Or again their aim may be to bring together, for the purpose of listening to and meditating on the Word, for the sacraments and the bond of the agape [...] people who already happen to be united in the struggle for justice, brotherly aid to the poor, human advancement”<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> See Conference of Latin American Bishops (CELAM), *The Church in the Present Day Transformation of Latin America in the Light of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference*, Washington DC 1970. Third General Conference of Latin American Bishops Puebla, *Evangelization at Present and in the Future of Latin America*, Conclusions 1980; Concluding Document, Aparecida, Bogota 2008.

<sup>68</sup> GS 40.

<sup>69</sup> EN 58.

Puebla's teaching on CEBs is detailed and extensive. Some of the more important elements are:

- The CEBs are "starting points for the building of a new society."
- They are "centres of evangelization and moving forces of liberation and development."
- They are "the expression of the Church's preferential love for the simple people."
- They offer "the chance to participate in the work of the Church and in the commitment to transform the world."
- In them the people's "religiosity is expressed, valued and purified."
- These small communities are a hope for the Church and are "favourable to the emergence of new forms of lay service."
- They promote greater commitment to justice in the social reality of the surrounding environment.
- The CEB is "a community of faith, hope, and charity; it celebrates the Word of God in life, through solidarity and through commitment to the Lord's new commandment; and [...] it makes present and effective the mission of the church".<sup>70</sup>

All these features are noted in the Aparecida Document, appearing in sections 178-179 and 180. The text also introduces a new element of positive evaluation, this being that the CEBs "are source and seed of varied services and ministries on behalf of life in society and the Church" (No. 179). Their theological place is identified in the title of Chapter V: "The Communion of the Missionary Disciples in the Church" and of its second section "Ecclesial Places for Communion" – following the diocese and the parish. The CEBs are discussed in Nos. 178 and 179 of the Document.<sup>71</sup>

<sup>70</sup> See Third General Conference of Latin American Bishops, Puebla, Nos. 629-643.

<sup>71</sup> In the ecclesial experience of some churches of Latin America and the Caribbean, basic (base) ecclesial communities have been schools that have helped form Christians committed to their faith, disciples and missionaries of the Lord, as is attested by the

In conclusion, we may refine our definition by reaffirming the distinction the Aparecida Document makes between what the CEBs are and what they do.

After describing what the CEBs ARE, we must say what they ARE FOR, which is what defines their MISSION, their IDENTITY.

- Their BEING is one aspect of their identity, essential and static, necessary;
- Their BEING FOR is another, dynamic, existential, fundamental.<sup>72</sup>

### **The basis in revelation of a communitarian spirituality**

I believe that the starting point has to be those passages in the Gospel where Jesus is astonished and moved by simple people and by simplicity, thus revealing the nature of the intimacy with the father that is made possible by the *koinonia* that underlies the spirituality of the CEBs.

### **Lasting joy in the simple: a biblical marginal note<sup>73</sup>**

The key texts for Jesus' wonder at the simple are to be found in Luke and Matthew. "Just at this time, filled with joy by the Holy Spirit, he said, 'I bless you, Father, Lord of heaven and of earth, for hiding these things from the learned and the clever and revealing them to

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generous commitment of so many of their members, even to the point of shedding their blood. They return to the experience of the early communities as described in the Acts of the Apostles (cf. Acts 2:42-47). Medellín recognized in them an initial cell for building the Church and a focal point of faith and evangelization. Puebla noted that small communities, especially basic ecclesial communities, enable the people to have access to greater knowledge of the Word of God, social commitment in the name of the Gospel, the emergence of new lay services, and education of the faith of adults. However, it also noted that "not a few members of certain communities, and even entire communities, have been drawn to purely lay institutions or have even been turned into ideological radicals, and are now in the process of losing any authentic feel for the Church." CELAM, Concluding Document, Aparecida, No. 178.

<sup>72</sup> See: <http://www.redescristianas.net/2006/-de-las-comunidades-eclesiales-de-base> (last retrieved on 27 March 2012).

<sup>73</sup> Pagola, J.A., *El camino abierto por Jesús*. Mateo 1, Madrid 2010, 126-132. In the analysis of the passages from Matthew I rely on the work of Pagola, a Biblical scholar who in my opinion rightly brings out the radicality of Jesus' humanity.

little children. Yes, Father, for that is what it has pleased you to do” (Luke 10:21), while Matthew 11:25 has “Jesus exclaimed” (ἀποκριθείς). The verb used here in the Greek New Testament might suggest that Jesus was answering a question: but it is simply the translation of the Hebrew verb *anah*, which means not only “answer” but also “speak” or “begin to speak.” Luke here indicates Jesus’ state of mind as he speaks: “filled with joy by the Holy Spirit.” Speaking colloquially, we might say that Jesus was touched or moved. This is a unique incident among what we know of Jesus through the Gospels. The *Biblia de América* has “*El Espíritu lleno de alegría a Jesús,*” “The spirit filled Jesus with joy.”<sup>74</sup> The wise of whom the text speaks (σοφών) are those who have wisdom (*hakan*), while the clever (συνετών = *arum*) are those who are successful in their everyday dealings, those who are skilful in this world. Neither of these qualities is necessary to the worth of human life (Isaiah 29:14-19). Here Jesus is referring to the *wise* Pharisees and to the prudent, sensible leaders of the Jews. From them the Father has hidden the secret of the Kingdom of God that he has revealed to infants or minors (νηπίοις), to those who culturally speaking can count for no more than children; to those comparable to children in their simplicity and in being considered in antiquity as without worth. Significant, too, are the verses that follow, found in both Luke and Matthew (Matthew 11:27 and Luke 10:22). What is revealed is surely that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God – not simply that that is what he is, but that is what he must be as he reveals his true, divine nature through words and deeds. Joachim Jeremias believes that the phrase originated in a parable and was later adapted by Jesus when he wanted to speak of the knowledge that Father and Son have of each other.<sup>75</sup> Yet it is not true that merely by virtue of their relationship a father and son will know each other perfectly or even well. In reality, the degree of such mutual familiarity varies greatly. What is more, there may well be people who know another father much better than his own son does. This closeness comes, then, when he reveals himself to his son: the only way he can be known, in these circumstances (Matthew 11:27d). All this is very hypothetical and irrelevant here, as all is completely explained, even without regard to his adoption of Christ as Son – who

<sup>74</sup> *Biblia de América*, Madrid 1994, 1567.

<sup>75</sup> Jeremias, J., *Studien zur neutestamentlichen Theologie und Zeitgeschichte*, Göttingen, 1966, 15-67.

receives everything, including the exceptional knowledge, “from my father” (υπό του πατρός μου) (v. 27) who is the “heavenly father” of v. 25. *Abba* is the Aramaic substrate of the word “father.” If Matthew 11:27bc does not use the form “my father” but does so in v. 27a, this is out of respect for the original words of Jesus, who calls the Father (God) “my Father”.<sup>76</sup>

This exceptional knowledge that Jesus has of his father may very well be the knowledge – a knowledge not only supernatural, but absolutely unique – that Jesus’ human soul has through his beatific vision. Thus it is that he sees his divine sonship and with it the divine fatherhood of God. The surprise and the joy he has in simple people and their ways of knowing God is closely connected to Jesus’ own inner closeness to his beloved father, his dearest dad, and his joy at this intimacy.

The three verses that follow in Matthew help us identify the primordial joy that Jesus has in the simple and unsophisticated: “Come to me, all you who labour and are overburdened, and I will give you rest. Shoulder my yoke and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble of heart; and you will find rest for your souls. Yes, my yoke is easy and my burden light” (Matthew 11:28-30).

The historical context of this passage is debatable. Jesus offers an invitation to *all* who labour and are overburdened. These are two synonyms, especially given the binary structure of these sentences. There is an echo here of the Wisdom tradition. The labour need not necessarily be physical work and effort, though it could of course very well be.

“To bear the yoke” means to follow the prescriptions of the Torah; this is a common phrase in the rabbinical literature that also appears in the New Testament, signifying that humanity is bound to these prescriptions as a slave is to his or her labour (see Jeremiah 28; Isaiah 58:6 and elsewhere).

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<sup>76</sup> Jeremias, J., *Jerusalem zur Zeit Jesu: eine kulturgeschichtliche Untersuchung zur neutestamentlichen Zeitgeschichte*, Göttingen 1962. See also the entry on Jeremias at [www.wiblex.de](http://www.wiblex.de). There are those who argue that not all Jeremias’s claims can be sustained. One such critic is Antonio Pinero at <http://www.antonopinero.com> (last retrieved on 28 March 2012).

By his teaching Jesus wishes to lift this yoke (Matthew 11:30), that is to provide emancipation from the burden of Pharisaic law and practice. For Luke, the teaching of the Pharisees was formalistic and insupportable (Luke 11:46). The religious Jew was hedged about by the 613 prescriptions of Mosaic Law and by the countless demands of tradition; the life of the Pharisee was an unbearable servitude to an enslaving law.<sup>77</sup>

Jesus' new yoke is his word of liberation. In a different way from Jewish tradition Jesus says something to mankind that is generally translated as "learn from me," μάθετε ἀπ' ἐμοῦ. But this should not be taken as implying passive imitation. In the Talmud one often finds the words "enter into my school," meaning "be taught by me." Faced with rabbinical education, Jesus proclaims himself Teacher and, faced with intolerable rabbinical prescriptions, he proposes an original and liberating attitude: "for I am gentle and humble of heart." For the Semites the heart was the seat of emotion and behaviour. We are invited to enter a school of cordiality, to learn by the rhythm of the heart. To gentleness is opposed anger, harshness, rigidity; to humility, pride. The educational theory of the Pharisees and doctors of the law was characterised by arrogance, being aimed at winning praise from each other (John 5:44). Hence their harsh, cruel and angry attitude towards all those who would not submit to their approach.

When Jesus invites his hearers to take on his yoke, he promises them: "you will find rest for your souls." For not only is his yoke easy and the burden light, but he also offers "life...to the full" (John 10:10) and with this grace, life renewed, in its plenitude; life thus becomes supernaturally joyous; life is a celebration.

### **The *Koinonia* of the New Testament as the motivating spirit of the CEBs<sup>78</sup>**

In the New Testament *koinonia* has two fundamental aspects:

<sup>77</sup> Biblia de América, 1468. The note to Luke 11:46 reads: "To receive this gift (of the Kingdom of God), one has to become simple; this means no longer following the law for duty's sake but following Jesus spontaneously and in total trust."

<sup>78</sup> Fr. Marins' take on biblical orthodoxy is novel in the way he uses it to ground the CEBs. I allow myself to be guided by the textual interpretations he offers at <http://padrepedropi-errecebs.blogspot.com/2011/12/vocacion-y-mision-de-las-cebs-equipos.html>, 7-9 (last retrieved on 28 March 2012).

- a) *Koinonia* is fundamentally a divine initiative, arising not from among the brothers and sisters themselves but from the Lord Jesus, who stands at their head and leads them; and:
- b) *Koinonia* is originally community of life; see Colossians 3:17, 1:20; 1 Corinthians 1:9, 8:6; 1 Corinthians 12:12; Galatians 3:26-28; Philippians 2:1.

### **Communion is the gift of Jesus Christ, the Lord**

In the process of incarnation and redemption Jesus Christ lives incarnate, crucified, resurrected and ascended to the throne of God. In the mystery of Easter, he – God with us – expresses his love for his brothers and sisters. In many modest, unassuming places there are liturgies that celebrate the “elder brother” who practices an unfeigned and unfailing solidarity with the community that celebrates him. To follow Jesus means experiencing laughter and anguish, life and death, hope and labour as a gift received and appreciated anew every day: in Jesus, God wears himself out with me in fellowship, tears, consolation, laughter...

Through the living and risen Christ and his unconditional love and tenderness, communion with the Father comes to us, his body, to make us a brother-and-sisterhood. Through Christ and thanks to Christ there comes to us the Holy Spirit, who is communion, and makes us brothers and sisters: 2 Corinthians 13:13. Communion is not a merely horizontal relationship, but firstly vertical. Strictly speaking, the cross is an image for the beautiful, englobing experience of the mystics and sages of the world: simultaneously horizontal and vertical, in a vital all-comprehending access of compassionate love. The whole life of brother-and-sisterhood becomes configured by the dynamic of “through Christ”: Colossians 3:17, 1:20. This is the true sense of the words we hear at the close of the Eucharistic Prayer: “Through Christ, and with Christ, and in Christ...”

*Koinonia* does not simply emerge from brother-and-sisterhood, but is rather an extension of the Father’s unconditional love as expressed in the person of Jesus. Relying upon ourselves, this profound communion of being and living would be impossible to bring about. Our efforts at fellowship, at communion with others and with our surroundings, are awkward and clumsy. True, profound communion is only attained when we receive the gift of Love, the gift of the Spirit, from the hands

of Jesus, so that we live together in his hands: “You can rely on God, who has called you to be partners with his Son Jesus Christ our Lord.” (1 Corinthians 1:9). The foundational event of this *koinonia* is a trusting, filial relation with his Son, converted into fraternity: “For you are all children of God, through faith, in Christ Jesus. [...] you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:26-28b). Here the original radicality of the communion between brothers and sisters is made evident. The one cannot be without the other: the man becomes man only in hearing his name on the lips of a woman. I am not me without a you who speaks my name. The image of the body, in the familiar conjunction and coordination of its parts, is crucial. It is in us as members of one body, a conjoined and coordinated family, that communion finds expression. We all depend on each other. This communion is given to us in the sacramental signs of Baptism and the Eucharist (though not only in them). Eucharistic *koinonia* (cf. 1 Corinthians 10:16) in the blood and body of Christ renews the baptismal *koinonia* and makes us truly sons and daughters, sharing in the same obedience to the Father as the Son. It also enables us to be true brothers and sisters, sharing in the same commitment as Jesus, our brother, to the service of our brothers and sisters. The source of all communion is *koinonia* of life, which is *koinonia* through Christ, with Christ, and in Christ.

### **A second aspect is the understanding of communion as shared life**

Life in Christ, which is the communion of the Spirit, finds itself realized in brother-and-sisterhood wherever all are of one mind, in the same love, the same spirit, the same feeling; where there is no place for pride, rivalry or quarrelling. It is a space of Grace: action comes from a heart filled to satisfaction with the love of God, with none of the begging for alms of the injured heart. There is humble generosity: Philippians 2:1. Being and doing spring from the vision of the Crucified: Philippians 2:6; 1 Corinthians 1:17ff; 2 Corinthians 13:4. *Koinonia* must thus always have its focus on the crucified, and the crucified of history. The irrefutable proof of faith: to ask the question “Where is God in the millions excluded from life?”, and to answer “There in every victim”,<sup>79</sup> for in them *koinonia* becomes sacramentally and really

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<sup>79</sup> We are encouraged to read theology “at the limits” by Jürgen Moltmann, in the sixth chapter of a book whose title, “The Crucified God,” also serves as that of the whole work:

possible, in communion with the suffering of Christ (Philippians 3:19). And there the Eucharist, known for good reason as the “breaking of bread,” involves the vital and celebratory dimension of sharing: the celebration of the miracle of the abundance of the Kingdom of God, which starts from the bread that Jesus broke for the whole company at the Last Supper, which he and his disciples share out among the community so as to strengthen the ongoing *koinonia* and the spirit of prayer - though the rite as such did not exist. The communion table is the table of the plurality of gifts, not of uniformity, much less of mere ritual, monotonous and meaningless. It is the table of diverse charisms and ministries - it is concrete reality that creates ministries in their multiplicity, for the sake of building the community and its engagement with the world in order to bring about the advent of the Kingdom. The CEBs are an expression of the apostolic, missionary *koinonia*, the living presence of a prophetic community, a framework for the propagation of the Gospel in the service of the Kingdom in this world.

### **The *unorthodox* sources of the CEBs’ communitarian spirituality**

#### ***Deep currents***

Fr. Nieto of the Diocese of Matamoros in the north of the country was Professor of Sapiential Books at the Pontifical University of Mexico between 1992 and 1994. He encouraged us to read the wisdom books of the Bible in comparative conjunction with Mexican sayings and proverbs. The correlations we found between the scriptural books and the wisdom literature of our own Mexican people astonished us. My fellow-students and I discovered more than a hundred Mexican sayings or proverbs that closely coincided: it was as if we had encountered the deep currents that connect all humanity. Immersing ourselves in them, we discovered that such connections established themselves at the least provocation, yet only on a few occasions, unfortunately, did they manifest themselves on the surface. Only in their accidents do cultures disagree and diverge. To leave the surface behind and to discover the mystery of the hidden connections was astonishing. I deeply believe that among our poor and simple people

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Moltmann, J., *The Crucified God, The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*, trans. Wilson R.A. and Bowden, J., London 1974.

there are hidden sources that support a communitarian spirituality and sustain the motivation of the CEBs. These are tales far removed from orthodoxy which, without the official standing of a Church inattentive to the signs of the times, are being lost or forgotten. Yet this deprives us of the true sources of inspiration that motivate and sustain the knowledge and feeling of a fully communal life. Here we find ourselves, of course, in a mode of the Kingdom of God, which supposes an abdication of control – not, though, an anarchy – where the wind blows when and where it will. A spirituality that claims to control the winds of the Spirit is a self-undermining spirituality. I wish to argue, then, that the tales, symbols, metaphors and poetry of our peoples are a source of spirituality, of this drive or inspiration that sustains the life of our CEBs.

Everyday stories, creation tales, the stories of men and women living ordinary lives, folk tales, legends, stories of resistance to the dominant cultures are in my view authentic sources of community life,<sup>80</sup> of the driving spirit of life in small communities.

On the other hand, and confirming what has already been said, spiritual traditions have always made use of the folktale to communicate their teachings; stories are able to explain, in their apparent simplicity, the most profound mysteries and the most elevated of truths. This is why all the great spiritual masters have always spoken in parables. It is clear that Christian and non-Christian stories are little known, leading believers themselves to think that they don't exist, except for the limited example of the Gospel parables. Without attempting to assess the fundamental contribution of the tales of the oriental traditions, we can point to the Zen Buddhist tradition, the Hasidic school of Judaism, the Sufi tradition in Islam, and the Taoist tales of China.

Simple and wise, our people live on these tales, parables, proverbs, sayings and poems. They are at the same time the creator of these simple stories, tales and anonymous proverbs spontaneously born to a deathless existence; narratives that come from afar, like the streams of water that bring life to the dry valleys it fills with hope, as they feel

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<sup>80</sup> A highly original work that deserves a respectful reading is Kurdi, O. / Palao Pons, P., *Cuentos amerindios, Desde las praderas, desiertos y montañas*, Madrid 2010.

enlivened and accompanied by the Spirit that reaches them before the missionary or the liturgical or ritual hierarchy. Wisdom has made its abode among the people and has made itself flesh in the meaningful word. This meaning, however, escapes closed, settled, domesticated modes of interpretation. It is a narrative that escapes every day, like the wind, from the grasp of cynical or controlling hermeneutics.<sup>81</sup> It is a *jácara* open to interpretation, capable of casting light on different areas, on new realities, by entering into a free relation of mutual influence without ever being exhausted.

## **Two dimensions of a single spirituality, discreet and oriented to service**

### ***One dimension of the spirit of the CEBs: the preferential option for the poor***

The central core of Christ's preaching was the Kingdom of God.<sup>82</sup> And at the centre of the Kingdom stands the God of the Beatitudes. He is the crucified God; the crucifixion is certain, carried out in view of all, an irrefutable historical fact. And a God resurrected in intimacy: discreet, his power is not the power that compels. It is like poetry, which tells all, but which needs a profoundly human sensibility to understand it. He is the God who in the most radical fashion has abandoned all power, all domination. He is the God who does not

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<sup>81</sup> Dr. Raúl Fornet makes the important point that the renewal of Christianity depends on moving from the inculturation of the Gospel to interculturality: "In the light of the new horizon outlined here we come to understand that the intercultural perspective enables Christianity to face the plurality of cultures and religions, enables it to recover its own plural memory, enables it to be reborn, on the basis of the abandonment of any controlling centre, drawing its strength from all the sites of plurality. A Christianity in the process of intercultural transformation would thus be a religion that builds the Kingdom, and a factor for peace in the world." Fornet Betancourt, R., *Interculturalidad y religión, Para una lectura intercultural de la crisis actual del cristianismo*, Quito 2007, 50. The emphasis is the present author's.

<sup>82</sup> "No-one doubts the information the sources provide: Jesus 'made his way through towns and villages preaching and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God' (Luke 8:1). We may safely say that what Jesus chiefly devoted his time, his energy and his entire life to is what he called "the Kingdom of God". It is, without a doubt, the central nucleus of his preaching, his deepest conviction, the passion that animates all his activity. Everything he says and does is in the service of the Kingdom of God. Everything acquires its unity, its true significance and its power to stir from this reality. The Kingdom of God is the key to grasping the meaning that Jesus gave to his own life and to understanding his project": Pagola, J.A., *Jesús, aproximación histórica*, Madrid 2008, 88. Available in English as: Pagola, Jesus, *An Historical Approximation*, trans. Margaret Wilde Miamia 2009.

command, but who calls, lovingly, looking into our eyes. He is the God of life, who grants dignity to all,<sup>83</sup> especially to those who have been denied it. He is the disconcerting God, who “manifests himself in his opposites.” A God without victims, he does not kill, does not destroy, but creates freedom and is therefore essentially poor. He was born poor and died poor. He had no bed at his birth, and at the time of his death he was excluded from the city, as if accursed: shockingly poor. And this God acts as the Holy Spirit. This Spirit, whose motherly care is a stranger to force, is the God of control given up; who exerts rather a personalizing force as great as that of a mother who suckles the baby at her breast. He is a God who fell victim to those who dominate and kill. The God who confronts without arms, or any violence whatsoever, the powers of this world.

Faced with this account, José Comblin<sup>84</sup> asks the radical question: “Who can experience this God?,” and we may wonder, “Who can have a spiritual experience of this bewildering deity? In other words: Who shares the spirituality of Jesus of Nazareth? Yes, those men and women who have undergone a similar experience in their own lives, the crucified who have experienced in their own lives the Spirit’s power to resurrect. These men and women – and these alone – feel in their own lives the power of the Crucified.

### ***A spirituality founded in a discreet reserve***

Men and women experience the presence of God in their lives and they have this authentic experience of God. Often the experience seems to them so natural that they *do not know* it to be a very special experience. They feel the strength of God in their weakness. They are

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<sup>83</sup> “God’s concern is to free human beings from all that dehumanizes them and makes them suffer. The message of Jesus impressed from the very beginning. His way of speaking about God provoked enthusiasm in the most ordinary and ignorant of Galileans. It was what they needed to hear: God was concerned for them. The Kingdom of God that Jesus proclaimed answered their greatest desire: to live with dignity. All the sources refer to one fact, hardly to be doubted: that Jesus felt himself to be the bearer of good news, and indeed his message brought great joy to the poor and humiliated peasants, people without status or material security, who were offered no hope by the Temple either.” Pagola, Jesus 96; emphasis by the present author.

<sup>84</sup> Comblin, J., *La Iglesia de los pobres y la experiencia de Dios* at: <http://www.cristianismeimondavui.org/vincles/ponencia%20J%20Comblin.pdf> (last retrieved on 28 March 2012).

people completely free, without personal ambition, without personal/individual desire. Always open, always patient – with beaming face and cheerful manner. It is very difficult to find such simplicity<sup>85</sup> in more cultivated people – though no doubt it can exist – as it can in “pagan” contexts infused by the Kingdom of God. They have the experience of God because they feel him in their lives, their actions and their words. They do not seek it, nor do they know that they have it, because they are so fully immersed in it that it seems natural to them. This is a fundamental discretion. Such people are poles apart from the empty propaganda and shrill media triumphs of the economic power of the controllers of the “image.” It is a spirituality of resistance that has no need of hurry or spectacular measures. The sacred is discreet.<sup>86</sup> To the CEBs it seems entirely natural to know so much and to understand the rhythm and meaning of life. As in many areas of human existence, sometimes less organised than the CEBs, there are many things that are hard to explain. But although life is hard, it is charged with meaning and unfolds in such a way that it gradually comes to be understood. This life is lived “on the skin”, it enchants; it – the life of the CEBs – captivates people and wins them over with the force of an invincible

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<sup>85</sup> A passage from Pagola’s commentary on Matthew 11:25-30 reads as follows: “Every time I have felt myself to be in the presence of someone close to God it has been someone simple of heart. Sometimes it has been a person of no great knowledge, at others a person of great culture, but it has always been a man or woman pure and humble in soul. More than once I have come to realize that it is not enough to speak of God to kindle faith. For many people certain kinds of religious knowledge are worn out and even when one endeavours to draw out all the force and poignancy they originally possessed, God remains ‘fossilized’ for them. I have, however, met simple people who have no need of grand ideas or arguments. They sense immediately that God is a “hidden God” and their hearts spontaneously cry out: “Lord, show me your face!”. Pagola, J.A., *El camino abierto por Jesús*, Matéo, Madrid 2010, 129.

<sup>86</sup> An anecdote – Those of us who are children of Mexican peasants will be vividly aware of the gradual exhaustion of the Mexican soil. As grandchildren we saw how our elders experienced the “good storms” that brought abundant rain with them. Today, with climate change, we witness the relentless droughts that assail the Mexican peasantry and with them the sowing of the fields, deliberately abandoned by the governments, past and present, of our lovely, sacred land of Mexico. We have likewise witnessed the unexpected floods that are hastening the erosion of lands without trees or brush. Sometimes, however, our grandparents would say, when they saw a soft and inaudible drizzle: “That’s the right rain for the millet, this drizzle that gradually seeps into the ground, without any thunder and lightning. The water that just falls and makes the maize fields grow – slowly, slowly, like the tenderness of God our father, is barely perceptible...”.

simplicity. It is an experience available to those who approach them with reverential respect, for it does not belong exclusively to the base communities, for they are the privileged witnesses to what they kindly offer as a gift to all of us who are not “poor” and who seek to follow the crucified and risen Christ.

***For the CEBs spirituality is solidarity: serving the poor***

As communities of believers, of followers of Christ, the CEBs have been steadfastly committed, sometimes in strong opposition to the ecclesiastical authorities, to the preferential option for the poor. Despite the fact that the Church in Latin America has officially adopted this as an evangelical priority and a condition of salvation (Matthew 25:41), it continues to encounter much resistance in certain ecclesiastical circles.<sup>87</sup> Gustavo Gutiérrez says: “If I am hungry, that is a physical problem; but if my brother is hungry, that is a spiritual problem.” For him, it is in service to the poor, in service to each other, and in prophetic service to the non-poor world, in which its members are sent by God as leading actors of its emancipation, that the Church finds eternal life and a spiritual identity. However, the notion of poverty is not to be understood only in an economic sense, but includes those who suffer, those who are oppressed, those who suffer on account of their colour, sex, age, social status, health or exclusion. They are those who exert no power of attraction, who are not productive. Even the hierarchs are poor, in their regression – inevitably, if that is what they want. This service to and alongside the poor is one of the aspects of *koinonia*, as witnessed by the practice of the Pauline communities. *Koinonia* of goods has its basis in 2 Corinthians 8:9: “Jesus Christ... although he was rich, he became poor for your sake.” The Fifth General Conference of Latin American and Caribbean Bishops confirmed and reinforced the “preferential option for the poor” supported at earlier

<sup>87</sup> What Raúl Fonet-Betancourt says of this scandalous Vatican-inspired regression is telling: “This restoration, this regression to pre-conciliar relations is no fairy-tale peddled by ‘progressive’ or ‘dialogue-inclined’ Christians. It is today the sad truth. It is the present-day face of dominant Christianity. [...] We Christians ought to start asking for the permission and the indulgence of others, those others we have so humiliated with our modern, Western arrogance, and whom we have so wounded with our militant methods [...], before addressing them, formulating our message and entering into an open dialogue without asymmetries [of power].” Fonet-Betancourt, R., *Interculturalidad y religión*, 36.

conferences. As Benedict XVI declared in his inaugural address: “The preferential option for the poor is implicit in the Christological faith in the God who became poor for us, so as to enrich us with his poverty (cf. 2 Corinthians 8:9).”

### ***To find instruction in service***

It is, therefore, necessary to share goods with people near and far, sharing the silences and allowing each *word* to illuminate life. *Koinonia* is not charity, nor is it alms for the poor. *Koinonia* of goods is a permanent, freely-consented endeavour called for by Jesus’ self-surrender, present in the bread – the bread that is abundance for all – and in the cup, sign of the triumph of a people that overcomes all poverty. The Eucharistic bread and cup oblige us to look at our brothers and sisters, and more particularly at the poorest. *Koinonia* demands a close relation between the immolated body of the Lord and the incorporated body of his smaller brothers and sisters. In this *koinonia* our eyes must always be on the least amongst us,<sup>88</sup> who represent the most endearing and necessary part of the body (1 Corinthians 12:22-25). Commitment to the cause of the poor springs from *koinonia* and leads in the practice of the CEBs to responses in the way of assistance, development and emancipatory practice, directed not so much at the effects but at the causes, structures, ideologies and systems that lead to poverty. The base communities, besides being the expression of the Church’s preferential love for the simple people,<sup>89</sup> have through their experience “helped the Church to discover the evangelizing potential of the poor.”<sup>90</sup>

### **Conclusion: The Kingdom of God is *abdication of control***

The issue here is people’s experience of growing together in full and free relationships. If there is to be the development of all, then the renunciation of control is decisive. Every person has their own rhythm, their own space, their own aspirations. The CEBs become that privileged space where the conditions of possibility are established for

<sup>88</sup> Sobrino, J., *Fuera de los pobres no hay salvación*, Madrid 2007, 57-58, available in English as: *No Salvation Outside the Poor*, Prophetic-Utopian Essays, New York 2008.

<sup>89</sup> See Third General Conference of Latin American Bishops, Puebla No. 643.

<sup>90</sup> Third General Conference of Latin American Bishops, Puebla No. 1147.

each person to grow and to become themselves, firstly through the development of the immediate group and, in the longer term, through that of society at large.

# Towards a Transformative Spirituality in Basic Ecclesial Communities

John Mansford Prior

## Spirituality

What drives us to do what we do, to be what we are? What makes us change or not change, go in one direction rather than in another when faced with choices that must be made? What motivates us to act as we do in daily life? The answer is our spirituality – the spirit within, the fire in our belly, the “heart within the heart” that roots our basic perspectives, our underlying attitudes, the choices we make day by day. For Christians, core perspectives and daily decision making are directed by personal and communal faith in Jesus the Nazarene. Spirituality is expressed in our particular appropriation of Gospel values and the Catholic tradition, the manner in which God’s love inspires us to love God and one another (Mrk 12:28-31; Matt 22:34-40; Lk 10:25-28; also Jn 13:34-35; 1 Jn 4:11-16). The question that arises is: what spiritualities are being nurtured by Basic Ecclesial Communities (BECs)?

While faith is a key source, basic perspectives and daily choices also take us to the core of our culture, to cultural meaning, values, convictions, that which gives us a particular cultural identity, that which forms our relationships with one another, with others, with the surrounding world. Worldview and world ethos demarcate all that is good and valuable, all that we feel the need to nurture in a particular culture. Hence cultural values are closely interwoven with our spirituality.

Caution is needed. The Indonesian Bishops once declared that “the deepest root of our political problems is that faith is no longer the

source of inspiration for daily life.”<sup>91</sup> The link between spirituality and daily life is not always obvious or healthy. In rapidly changing societies, religion may well become a social identity marker, demarcating one group over against another, and be seen as primarily a matter of ritual observance detached from any ethical stance.

And so this essay looks at the ways spirituality impacts upon the individual, the family and the common life of Basic Ecclesial Communities, the ways BEC members respond to their environment. For this we need to look at the ways faith and spirituality influence cultural values, stimulate responses to unjust social situations, and guide relations with people of other faith traditions. Spirituality in BECs also involves looking at the way the Bible is read, and at the role popular devotions and liturgy play. All these compete in forming attitudes and actions in daily life, in shaping the spirituality by which we live.

## **Cultural Values and Spirituality**

### ***Cultural Values***

The majority of Asian, African and Oceanic Christians come from nations and ethnic groups that enjoy indigenous cultures. While many indigenous cultural domains belong to small ethnic groups, some, such as in Nigeria, belong to large nations. Each is culturally unique, and yet there are a number of similar key values, *mutatis mutandis*, found in each cultural domain. This essay reflects experience with spiritualities in the cultures of eastern Indonesia.

To appreciate the spirituality of BECs, we need to understand the way culture channels and influences our thought processes along certain lines.<sup>92</sup> We are formed by our cultural environment and at the same time are active agents of cultural change. The globalisation of economics and communication systems is not simply dissolving local cultural ways of thinking.

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<sup>91</sup> Indonesian Bishops' Conference, *Nota Pastoral, Keadilan Sosial bagi Semua, Aspek Sosial Politik*, Jakarta 2003.

<sup>92</sup> This section on cultural values is indebted to the life-time engagement of Bishop Francisco Claver (1926-2010) whose participative pastoral vision inspired the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences for 40 years. See his "final testament" in: *The Making of a Local Church*, Quezon City 2009, in particular Chapter 9, *The Spirituality of Discerning Communities*, 151-170.

In indigenous cultures, the extended family forms the matrix that holds all key societal values together, such as clan-based order, respect for old age, the authority of elders, their love and concern for children, the obedience, respect, and gratitude owed to parents on the part of children, family solidarity, the paramount good of the family, care for its good name, its prestige and honour. From this matrix springs the cultural values of hospitality, the welfare of the immediate community, good relations with non-family members, social harmony, and accord with nature. Each value that makes cultures indigenous flows from the heart of society, from the extended family. Family values help to sustain the family spiritually and materially. All this is positive and in such societies, BECs usually form closely bound communities. However, where there is a weak sense of citizenship and the common good, family values can engender systemic corruption. For in indigenous societies, the family comes first.<sup>93</sup> In which case, what impact is being made by the presence of BECs?

BECs can and do open up horizons and prompt concern beyond the family. For while an “ethnic spirituality” would confine the Gospel within tightly defined family concerns, a Gospel spirituality redraws each and every relationship, both local and global, as between brothers and sisters. The ideal is extreme: “love your enemies ... If you love only those who love you what reward will you get? Even the tax collectors do as much.” (Mt 5:44, 46) BECs in town, whose members come from a variety of ethnic and social backgrounds, are more open to this Gospel spirituality, than are village BECs, which by their very location, may well consist of members of a single extended family.

### **Local Values, Global Values**

In the age of the hand phone and internet, nowhere is isolated, everywhere is influenced by global trends and values. In fact traditional family values have long intermingled with “modern” values such as individualism, personal initiative, and achieved rather than proscribed social status. Indigenous societies have also long been part

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<sup>93</sup> I am in no way intimating that indigenous societies are more corrupt than the non-indigenous; the financial and banking crises of 2009 are sufficient proof of that. Nevertheless, cultural values are ambivalent: immensely good and yet open to distortion in rapidly changing social environments.

of nation states which formally accept political participation and the legal equality of citizens. Many countries have legislated on gender equality and domestic violence.<sup>94</sup>

The encroachment of the acquisitive global market, with the mass migration it has generated, has led to a clash between traditional family values and modern commercial values. Often enough they lie un-integrated, whereby clan values remain strong in the family sphere (at birth, marriage, death/inheritance), while market values are increasingly decisive in the workplace. This clash often leads to indigenous societies being pushed to one side as their ancestral lands with their vast natural resources are taken over by outsiders driven by the acquisitive values of the market. What is the role of the BEC in this scenario?

In BECs and faith-based social movements, biblical spirituality can integrate the values of the extended family with modern values such as personal freedom, participation, individual initiative and achievement. Christian spirituality can and should encourage support for social and gender equality, active participation in social issues, non-violence as both ethos and strategy, and honesty and transparency in personal and commercial relationships. As Francisco Claver puts it, “a powerful spirituality, the kind which if internalized and truly believed in, and made the dominant force in a community’s thinking and acting on social questions, would radically change society.”<sup>95</sup> We find such spiritualities in socially-engaged BECs and in faith-based social movements and networks.

### Questions for Reflection

How far are religious practices in the BECs, such as Bible sharing, helping to create a counter culture which is questioning the pragmatic and instrumental logic of post-modernism? Are its religious practices strengthening and extending the bounds of solidarity, nurturing ever greater sensitivity to social justice? Is the spirituality of BECs enabling their members to live in the

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<sup>94</sup> India (secular state with large Hindu majority) and Indonesia (secular state with large Muslim majority) have some of the most advances legislation on gender justice anywhere.

<sup>95</sup> Claver, op cit. 160.

midst of both traditional local and modern global values systems, enabling them consciously to decide upon what is of value, what is possible? Is their spirituality making it possible for members to attain their own forms of modernity, a world that is still populated with both capricious nature spirits and protective ancestral spirits, as well as ghosts and devils, the internet and hand phones?

### **Spirituality and Social Justice**

As concerned Christians, members of BECs engage in analysing social problems that they themselves face, and those faced by their neighbours. They ask: who is benefiting what, who is loosing out and why? How has the situation developed over the past five, ten, fifteen years?

In multi-faith societies, socially-engaged BECs are almost invariably open to inter-faith collaboration in efforts to lessen poverty and stem corruption, to struggle for greater social justice and work for more ecologically-enhancing economic development.

#### **Questions for Reflection**

Do the religious practices of the BEC tend to make its members more ready to accept their fate, remain passive and turn inwards on themselves, or do their religious practices inspire them with the Gospel vision of a community of equals living in loving solidarity and compassionate justice? Do their religious practices tend to make members quietly conformist or do they empower them to readily resist social injustice?

This is not a question of selecting specific Bible passages or opting for particular devotions, but rather the way the Bible and religious practices are inducing basic attitudes.

### **Spirituality and People of Other Faith Traditions**

Wherever Christians are a minority, as they are in Asia apart from in the Philippines and Timor Leste, the choice is to withdraw inwards, to reinforce what distinguishes us from others (rosaries, statues, grottos, Marian pilgrimages), and reduce religious observance to community ritual for individual comfort and support. The

alternative, the dream behind BECs, is that Gospel spirituality will be appropriated through openness to the Spirit wherever She blows, through dialogue with people of other faith communities, identifying oneself as leaven, as salt, as a beacon in society. Surveys show that in practice, a majority of BECs are concerned with their own members, their personal, family and social life; only a minority reach out as a small committed communities to engage with wider society.<sup>96</sup> Also, research in five Indonesian cities found that Catholics active in the charismatic movement had a decidedly more negative attitude to Muslims than other Catholics.<sup>97</sup>

### Questions for Reflection

Does the stronger our faith identity, the more active our religious involvement, and the more fervent our spiritual commitment, inevitably entail a distancing from people of other faith traditions, demand negative stereotyping? Is it to be expected that the more fervent our spirituality, the less likely we are to listen and learn from people of other faith traditions? Does openness to “the other” always imply compromise, shallowness, a lack of commitment?

Devotions celebrated in BECs can be specifically Catholic while sensitive to members of the majority faith in a multi-religious society. Religiosity can be ecumenical or exclusive, open to “the other” as fellow pilgrims or set up impervious religious identity boundaries.

### Spirituality and Popular Religiosity

Religious practices either reinforce a culture of the inarticulate or free them from such. In the latter case, ordinary people are able to make choices and claim a role in remaking their world. The spirituality of popular religiosity can work both ways. Feeling powerless

<sup>96</sup> For research in eastern Indonesia see Panda Koten, P., *Potret Komunitas Basis Gerejani Kita, Laporan Riset Candraditya 2004-2007*. Maumere: Penerbit Ledalero & Puslit Candraditya, 2009. For research in eight diverse Indonesian districts see: *Laporan Penelitian Kelompok Basis Gerejawi (KB) di Indonesia 2002-2004*, Sawi, No.20, Jakarta 2009.

<sup>97</sup> Subangun, E., *Dekolonisasi Gereja di Indonesia, Suatu proses setengah hati*, Jogjakarta 2003.

to improve the national political culture and faced with the erosion of public ethics, which seem impervious to any action by the poor majority, what remains is the “weapons of the weak”, that is, popular rituals and devotions that symbolically resist the encroachment of global and local capitalist tentacles of social injustice. Popular rituals potentially play an important role in BECs, if and when social movements for societal renewal have occasion to irrupt.<sup>98</sup> A mobilisation of concerned people to tackle political and economic corruption, for instance, can transform the spiritual landscape of BECs. Such “politics of conscience” can break through the enervating dynamics of conventional popular religiosity. Suffering often lies at the core of many popular devotions.

### **Spirituality and Suffering**

Throughout much of Africa, Asia and Latin America, and by no means confined to areas once colonised by Spain or Portugal, the crucified Christ and the Mater Dolorosa are central in devotional life. There is a stark difference between sentimental devotion and biblically-inspired devotion. We can discern the difference in the way devotions impact on life. The assimilation of Catholic devotions by local indigenous cultures has taken place in quite diverse ways.

In parts of the Philippines, where young men have themselves physically nailed to a cross on Good Friday, the pain inflicted is very much a “shamanistic” exercise, a source of personal and spiritual empowerment, whereby intense suffering provides the inner strength to overcome the challenges of another year.<sup>99</sup> In other areas, such as in eastern Indonesia, crucifixion tableaus on Good Friday reinforce a sense of helplessness, failure, sinfulness, of passive resignation to painful fate.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> See: Scott, J.C., *Weapons of the Weak, Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, New Haven 1985. Also: *Domination and the Arts of Resistance, Hidden Transcripts*, New Haven 1990.

<sup>99</sup> For background see: Mesa, J. de, *And God Said, “Bahala Na!” The Theme of Providence in the Lowland Filipino Context*, Quezon City 1979.

<sup>100</sup> Kleden, P.B., *Salib Yesus – Penderitaan Maria, Devosi Maria dalam Ibadat Jalan Salib versi Solor-Lamaholot*, *Jurnal Ledalero*, 10/2 (2011) 161-187.

### Questions for Reflection

Do the Stations of the Cross during Lent, the Holy Week liturgy, and the tableaux on Good Friday reinforce a sense of helplessness, inevitability, a quiet acceptance of fate? Conversely, does such empathy with the suffering of the Crucified One and His mother, open devotees up imaginatively to the suffering around them, and so inspire them to do something to relieve it?

Popular religiosity reminds us of the importance of rituals and devotions for the mass of ordinary people in rebuilding their world and in creating solidarity. Both the role and the form that these rituals take tell us how the weak can maintain a ray of hope in situations that do not give any apparent cause for hope (see Rm 4:18). Through popular devotions, the crushed reed will not be broken nor the faltering wick snuffed out. (cf Is. 42:3)

Popular religious practices can increase personal and communal self-respect, and strengthen trusting relationships among ordinary people who refuse to resign to fate. Popular religious practices produce an experience of solidarity and self-reliance, which in the right conditions raises social awareness, giving rise to a spirit of struggle, while increasing personal and communal self-respect.

It may well be that ordinary people in their BECs are creative agents who, through their Bible sharing and popular devotions, are forging their own identity in the face of a tsunami of social pressure.

### The Spirituality of Bible Sharing

The majority of BECs are primarily concerned with their own members. Many are comforted by traditional devotions while also seeking spiritual insights for personal and family life in Bible sharing. Meanwhile, a minority of BECs are socially engaged with followers of other faith traditions, and read the Bible in order to discern Christ's presence in "the other", and are involved in inter-faith networks for social transformation.

### Question for Reflection

What role is Bible sharing playing in solving the problems of daily life, as families, neighbourhoods and with the wider society?

A transformative spirituality will approach the Bible in any number of contextual ways, recognising the social, cultural, economic and political context of any passage being pondered. For Bible sharing is not just a sharing of experiences and insights; it is at the heart of spirituality and leads to shared action with shared responsibility.

An example. One BEC has members who are HIV/AIDS survivors, both widows and men, married and single, the young and not so young. Most are returned migrants. Rejected by their families (what spirituality is at work here?), and consciously ignored by the pastor and pastoral council who “pass by on the other side” (Lk. 10: 31-32), they meet regularly for mutual support, and to share information, pain, problems and possibilities. In the Scriptures they have met Jesus personally. On one occasion they shared the story of the sick man at the Pool of Bethesda (Jn. 5:1-18).<sup>101</sup> This reading gave them new meaning, renewed strength, fresh hope and further self-respect as friends and followers of Jesus, despite rejection by the wider society and the official Church. The HIV/AIDS survivors manage to weave the thread of social justice in the Gospel narratives with their life situation. They discover a spirituality within and begin “drinking from their own wells” (Prov. 5:15), and in so doing have become spiritually somewhat independent from the parish.

BECs are creating spiritualities according to the needs of their members, rooting them in an increasingly rootless society, and so they discover a new vitality. When this happens, BEC biblical spirituality can be seen as a form of local wisdom from which the official Church can learn and grow.

### **Liturgical Spiritualities**

Liturgical celebrations can also be influential on the spiritual life of BEC members, for emotions, feelings and attitudes are fed by symbols and rites more than by formal doctrine. In the context of BECs, the celebration of the sacraments can be rooted in the life experience of the people. This is not automatic.

Where Christians are a minority, or where social upheaval is

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<sup>101</sup> Trinold Asa, B., *Memaknai Pengalaman Hidup Orang Dengan HIV/AIDS KDS Flores Plus Support, Sebuah Refleksi Teologis-Biblis*, Jurnal Ledalero 20/2 (2011), 231-248.

endemic, religion can tend to confine itself to ritual. Here liturgy is an internal matter for the congregation, reinforcing personal commitment and communal identity, a source of inspiration and comfort for individuals and family life. The alternative, is to celebrate liturgy in the BEC as the celebration of God's creative and salvific presence in the whole of life, a sacramental celebration of life's value, meaning and purpose in Christ. Such liturgies of Word and Eucharist can change values, for instance, from tolerance of corruption, injustice and the devastation of the ecology to acknowledging them as wrong, harmful and destructive. With the accelerating destruction of communities and the earth in much of Asia and Africa, such a spirituality sees the root values of global capitalism as sinful: individual acquisition, unbridled greed, the deification of the market place with the subjugation of the poor to the profit of the super-rich. Such liturgies are at once all embracing and prophetically challenging.

#### Questions for Reflection

How creative and life-giving are our BEC liturgical celebrations? Do they consciously unite the person and proclamation, the life and deeds of Jesus the Christ with His members in the BEC, their life and their daily struggle?

Liturgies can include or exclude, embrace or ignore. The joy of our Catholic sacramental and prophetic worship can inspire daily life when celebrated in small communities, when rooted in their daily struggle.

#### **Spirituality and Basic Ecclesial Communities**

In this essay I have understood BECs to be relatively small communities of trust, of around 15 to 20 families, who can easily get together regularly to listen to and grapple with God's Word, to share daily issues and problems among themselves and in wider contexts, and then seek out solutions in the light of God's Word – and act on them. Such BECs tend to act as semi-autonomous communities in dynamic networks. However, where BECs are diocesan policy, it can come about that every parish is divided into small groups, some of which are true BECs, others little more than administrative units of the parish that also gather for prayer.

The character of the BEC – a small creative faith community or, conversely, a devotional and administrative unit, very much decides which spirituality will be appropriated by its members. A clericalised Church will tend to absorb BECs as administrative and devotional units within a parish under the authority of the priest and his pastoral council. Here spirituality gives personal comfort and sustenance in patient hope for God's shalom in the next life. On the other hand, a participative, dialogal Church will make room for a variety of BECs, ecclesial and social movements with varying relationships with parish and diocese. Of these, many will mature with a socially-engaged spirituality, a faith-based commitment actively witnessing to and struggling for Gospel values in social life.

BECs and socially-engaged ecclesial movements and networks are the best place to birth and mature a biblical spirituality, the small trusting community where the members themselves learn to live and act joyfully in solidarity with the victims of local and global injustice, where they both spontaneously and consciously fuse the best of their cultural values with those of the Gospel.



## Exploring Closeness – Small Christian Communities as hubs of pastoral care

Franz-Peter Tebartz-van Elst

“The ‘door of faith’ (Acts 14:27) is always open for us, ushering us into the life of communion with God and offering entry into his Church. It is possible to cross that threshold when the word of God is proclaimed and the heart allows itself to be shaped by transforming grace.” These are the opening words of Benedict XVI’s *motu proprio* entitled *Porta Fidei*<sup>102</sup>, with which he indicated a Year of Faith on 11 October 2011. He started his initiative with a word of gratitude, calling to mind the 50th anniversary of the Second Vatican Council and expressing “[...] the need to rediscover the journey of faith so as to shed ever clearer light on the joy and renewed enthusiasm of the encounter with Christ.”<sup>103</sup>

Benedict XVI then develops this idea further, as a starting point for the missionary propagation of the Christian faith: “We cannot accept that salt should become tasteless or the light be kept hidden (cf. Matthew 5:13-16). The people of today can still experience the need to go to the well, like the Samaritan woman, in order to hear Jesus, who invites us to believe in him and to draw upon the source of living water welling up within him (cf. John 4:14). We must rediscover a taste for feeding ourselves on the word of God, faithfully handed down by the Church, and on the bread of life (...).”<sup>104</sup>

The approach formulated here also characterises an initiative called Small Christian Communities, which started in other parts

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<sup>102</sup> Benedict XVI., Apostolic Letter “*Motu proprio data*” *Porta Fidei* of the Supreme Pontiff Benedict XVI for the Indication of the Year of Faith, 11 October 2011, Art. 1.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.* Art. 2.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.* Art. 3.

of the world and recently reached Europe.<sup>105</sup> Inspired by positive experiences in sister churches in Africa, Asia and Latin America, including those that adopted the Asian Integral Pastoral Approach (an initiative supported by *missio Aachen*), the idea of Small Christian Communities gradually came to be adapted to German culture from the late 1980s onwards. The basic idea of these Small Christian Communities, which originated in South Africa, is that of a small locally based group living out its Christian faith. It involves accepting a challenge that was predicted as an important future development by Karl Rahner in the 1970s: “The devout Christian of the future will either be a ‘mystic’ (...) or will cease to be anything at all.”<sup>106</sup> The concept of a Small Christian Community is, therefore, a response to the situation of Christians in society, a situation which is currently undergoing substantial changes. Prompted by demographic developments, by an increasing mobility of relationships within society and, in particular, by a growing process of secularisation which encompasses all spheres of life, Christians have been seeking ways to proclaim the Gospel with a greater focus on mission.<sup>107</sup> We cannot and must not close our eyes to the fact that “the level of religiousness and Church has sunk to a low point in our society and throughout Europe.”<sup>108</sup>

Set against this background and in sensitive perception of the same, the German Bishops see the global community of faith in the universal Church as an opportunity. In their pastoral letter “His Salvation for all Nations” (2004) they say: “The universal Church as

<sup>105</sup> See also: Hennecke, H., *Kirche, die über den Jordan geht, Expeditionen ins Land der Verheißung*, Münster 2008; o. cit. (ed.), *Kleine Christliche Gemeinschaften verstehen, Ein Weg mit den Menschen zu sein*, Würzburg 2009; Vellguth, K., *Eine neue Art Kirche zu sein, Entstehung und Verbreitung der Kleinen Christlichen Gemeinschaften und des Bibel-Teilens in Afrika und Asien*, Freiburger Theologische Studien, Volume 169, Freiburg i.Br. 2005.

<sup>106</sup> See also: Rahner, K., *Frömmigkeit früher und heute*, in: o. cit. *Schriften zur Theologie*, Volume VII, Einsiedeln-Zurich, Cologne 1966, 22.

<sup>107</sup> See also: Tebartz-van Elst, F.-P., *Gemeinde in mobiler Gesellschaft. Kontexte – Kriterien – Konkretionen*, Studien zur Theologie und Praxis der Seelsorge, Volume 38, Würzburg 2001, especially 266-359; o. cit. *Werte wahren – Gesellschaft gestalten, Plädoyer für eine Politik mit christlichem Profil*, Kevelaer 2012, especially 11-16; 19-32.

<sup>108</sup> Kasper, W., *Neue Evangelisierung, Eine pastorale, theologische und geistliche Herausforderung*, in: Augustin, G./ Krämer, K. (ed.), *Mission als Herausforderung, Impulse zur Neuevangelisierung*, Theologie im Dialog, Volume 6, Freiburg i.Br. 2011, 23-39, 24.

a community of faith is at the same time a learning community, a community of prayer and a community of solidarity. As the universal Church manifests itself through numerous local churches, which are each rooted in their respective cultures, the universal Church is an inter-cultural and inter-church learning community.<sup>109</sup>

This fundamental attitude makes it possible to develop an awareness whereby the experiences of other sister churches are seen as an inspiration for one's own situation. The purpose of this article is, therefore, to take a close look at the initiative of Small Christian Communities, as implemented and developed in Germany in recent years, and then to report on specific steps taken in the Diocese of Limburg.

### Church in the neighbourhood

Small Christian Communities are very clearly based within their local context. They follow the basic principle of manageable Christian groups, comprising a small number of members, who live out their Church-based Christian faith in everyday life. The term 'community' does not refer to the formation of spiritual fellowships in the sense of spiritually like-minded Christians, organised in a wider context, e.g. at the diocesan level or beyond.

Rather, the key concept for a Small Christian Community is that of *communio*, i.e. a Church fellowship that can be experienced specifically within a local church and thus within a parish and a pastoral context. The reference point continues to be the *communio* of the entire Church. For this purpose Small Christian Communities endeavour to be Church at the truly local level, as outlined, in particular, by Vatican II. Church is to be fully accessible in everyday life, in all areas of life and thus 'in the neighbourhood'. This is the sense in which the communities see themselves as "the most local units of the Church"<sup>110</sup>.

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<sup>109</sup> Sekretariat der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz (ed.), *Allen Völkern Sein Heil, Die Mission der Weltkirche, Die deutschen Bischöfe*, No. 76, Bonn 2004, 55.

<sup>110</sup> Erklärung der ostafrikanischen Bischöfe, *Kleine Christliche Gemeinschaften*, 1979, in: *missio Aachen, Wir sind Kirche, Kleine Christliche Gemeinschaften in Ostafrika, missio-Reihe*, Volume 8, Aachen 1984, 8-16, 11.

Where Church is concerned, the concept of *communio* therefore goes further than a spiritual community formed on a voluntary basis and its manifestation is always geared to the surrounding locality. Small Christian Communities do not wish to be elitist groups or “self-help or life help groups on faith issues” (Bishop Wanke)<sup>111</sup>, but realisations of Church in a given locality where each Christian understands the calling received through baptism, or – as Benedict XVI reminded us when he declared the Jubilee Year to the Apostle Paul: “The Church is not an association that wishes to promote a certain cause. It is not about a cause. It is about the person of Jesus Christ, who also as Risen remained ‘flesh.’ (see Luke 24:39) (...) He has a body. He is personally present in the Church. ‘Head and Body’ form a single subject.”<sup>112</sup>

### **Witness of life – witness of the Word**

Being aware of the inseparability of Christ and the Church and experiencing his presence through Holy Scripture and the Sacrament, the approach of Small Christian Communities is based on the desire to give Christ room in everyday life through Scripture.

Small Christian Communities, therefore, put special emphasis on sharing the Bible.<sup>113</sup> However, this approach to God’s Word is definitely not regarded as one (among many) method(s) of Bible study or exegesis. “Rather, the purpose of sharing the Bible is that Christians should experience the presence of Christ in the Word of God, an experience that is theologically founded in *Dei Verbum* so that they can enter into dialogue with Christ in a Church setting.”<sup>114</sup> Interpreted in this way, the idea of sharing the Bible is essentially Christological in character: gathered together in prayer, Christian brothers and sisters join together as they listen to the Lord who is present through the Word of God in Holy Scripture. As the context is very clearly that of *communio* and thus a Church-based fellowship, these communities go

<sup>111</sup> Quoted from: Kehl, M., Die neuen ‘Lebenshilfegruppen im Glauben’ und die Priester, in: Geist und Leben 78 (2005), 53-60.

<sup>112</sup> Benedict XVI, Papal Homily at Vespers, inaugurating the Jubilee Year to the Apostle Paul in the Basilica of St. Paul Outside the Walls, 28 June 2008.

<sup>113</sup> See box on (insert page number in text)

<sup>114</sup> Hennecke, C., Kleine Christliche Gemeinschaften – eine kleine Navigationshilfe, in: www.kcg-net.de (20 April 2012).

beyond any privately focused spiritual self-assurance in the sense of an individualised journey of faith. The people of God, the Church, is the subject of Scripture. “It is about experiencing the presence of Christ in a way that manifests the Church. As Christians gather to hear the Word of Christ, it becomes ‘incarnate’ in His Body. And His Body is the Church, which – like Christ Himself – has the important mission of proclaiming the good news to the poor.”<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> Hennecke, C., *Kirche, die über den Jordan geht, Expeditionen in das Land der Verheißung*, Münster 2008, 188.

### Sharing the Bible <sup>116</sup>

**Sharing the Bible is more than a method of interpreting Scripture. It is a way in which Christ Himself speaks through His Word, meets people and makes them part of his Body.**

#### 1. Welcome – sitting down with Christ

**We welcome Christ who is in our midst. We realise that He is the one who has invited us.**

*Facilitator: Let's just spend some time appreciating that the Lord is in our midst: Who would like to welcome Christ in their own words?*

#### 2. Reading – hearing God's Word

**We give expression to God's Word through our own voices. Each voice conveys His Word.**

*Facilitator: Let's open the Bible – the Book/Gospel/Epistle of ... chapter ... (When everyone has opened their Bibles:) Who would like to read out verses ... to ... ? Who would like to read the passage for a second time?*

#### 3. Abiding – discovering hidden treasure

**We let God's Word speak to us. Christ speaks within us.**

*Facilitator: We are now going to speak out certain words or short phrases three times. Each time we will pause briefly after the first and second times.*

#### 4. Silence – being aware of God's presence

**We are silent together. Now God can speak within us.**

*Facilitator: Let's be silent for... minutes so that God can speak to us.*

#### 5. Sharing – meeting with God together, through the others

<sup>116</sup> Procedure at a Bible-sharing session in: Hennecke, C., o. cit. 187.

**We share what God is saying through us. The Body of Christ can now grow among us.**

*Facilitator: Which word spoke to you? Let us talk about the things that have touched our hearts.*

- 6. Action – letting ourselves be inspired by God’s Word**  
**“What is the specific purpose for which we are sent?”**  
**– Decision-making as a communal process of spiritual discernment.**

*Facilitator: We’re now going to talk about the task we are facing and which we want to accept as a challenge.*

- 7. Prayer**

**Having thought and talked about things, we are now going to put them before the Father again. This is the common priesthood of all believers.**

*Facilitator: Let us pray. Anyone who wants to is welcome to pray freely in their own words. (Then:) Let’s finish with a prayer or a song which we all know by heart.*

## Eucharistic position

The “incarnational principle” of Scripture is always clearly related to the sacramental presence of the Lord in the Eucharist. This connection was emphasised by Benedict XVI in the first volume of his book about Jesus: “The connection with ‘God’s people’ as a subject is vital for Scripture. On the one hand, this book – Scripture – is the yardstick that has been set by God and gives direction to His people. On the other hand, Scripture only lives within His people who reach beyond themselves in Scripture in order to become God’s people in all profoundness, as prompted by the incarnate Word. God’s people – the Church – are the living subject of Scripture where the words of the Bible are continually present. This naturally means that the people must see themselves in this way, receiving this status from the incarnate Christ, and that they must let themselves be directed, led and guided by Him.”<sup>117</sup>

In this sense Small Christian Communities are focused entirely on the Eucharistic centre of the Church, the “fount and apex of the whole Christian life.”<sup>118</sup> Small Christian Communities derive their strength not from within themselves or from meetings, but from the Eucharist that is held within the parish or the church district as a celebration of the one Church. “The Eucharist impacts the Church, and the Church impacts the Eucharist.”<sup>119</sup> This interconnection creates identity and forms the very centre, which is manifested through Small Christian Communities. It is by celebrating the Eucharist that the local church bears testimony to the faith it shares with the Pope and with the local bishop. This is what makes their faith Catholic. “The Bishop ensures that his section of the Church should be Eucharistic, in other words, that it should meet the basic purpose of the Eucharist, i.e. that his local church should partake of *communio* and thus ‘communion’ of the entire – one – Body of Christ.”<sup>120</sup>

<sup>117</sup> Ratzinger, J. /Benedikt XVI., Jesus von Nazareth, Erster Teil, Von der Taufe im Jordan bis zur Verklärung, Freiburg i.Br. 2007, 20.

<sup>118</sup> LG 11.

<sup>119</sup> Beinert, W., Eucharistie wirkt Kirche – Kirche wirkt Eucharistie, in: Stimmen der Zeit 122 (1997) 10, 665-677.

<sup>120</sup> Tebartz-van Elst, F.-P., Der Kirche Gesicht und Stimme geben, Petrusdienst als pastorale Sendung, in: Gänswein, G. (ed.), Benedikt XVI. Prominente über den Papst, Illertissen 2012, 155-168, 161.

What enables and empowers Christians to offer a living testimony is the official oversight and support they receive through the ministry of preaching the Gospel and of maintaining unity, a ministry that is born of the Eucharist. These connections give a Small Christian Community a special awareness of its own mission: “The Eucharist creates the Body of the Church, and the corporal character of Christian existence must not be reduced to anything purely individualist or private in everyday life. Church must continue to be a tangible experience in everyday life, both when gathering together and in being sent out. Therefore it manifests itself locally, as everyone living in this place is part of this Church as a community. This is the only way that mission (i.e. being sent out) can take shape.”<sup>121</sup>

### **Ministry to the world – a sign to the world**

Faith comes through hearing. It does not come primarily through logical conclusions or philosophical endeavours. Our faith develops through fellowship (*communio*) and in response to the testimonies of others. It is through a sacramental community and through listening to Scripture that our faith also develops on a personal level. Yet it cannot be reduced to a purely private sphere. Christian faith can never be an end in itself, but must be testified through one’s own life. “Faith, precisely because it is a free act, also demands social responsibility for what one believes.”<sup>122</sup>

This shows very clearly what is also expressed at stage six in a Bible-sharing session of a Small Christian Community (see above). It is important to ensure that our own mission to the world, as a witness of Christ, turns into action. It is very much part of the Eucharistic essence of the Church that every Christian is called to become a sign to others that God is present among men (sacrament).

This universal challenge to engage in missionary evangelisation is met by the local and specific engagement of a Small Christian Community. By offering a living testimony we also point to the testimony of the Word. Christians thus become ‘placeholders of

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<sup>121</sup> Hennecke, C., o. cit. 191.

<sup>122</sup> Benedict XVI, Apostolic Letter “*Motu proprio data*” *Porta Fidei* of the Supreme Pontiff Benedict XVI for the Indication of the Year of Faith, 11 October 2011, Art. 10.

God' in the midst of the world, yet without losing their identity in it. Benedict XVI particularly emphasises this point in connection with the forthcoming Year of Faith: "Intent on gathering the signs of the times in the present of history, faith commits every one of us to become a living sign of the presence of the Risen Lord in the world. What the world is in particular need of today is the credible witness of people enlightened in mind and heart by the word of the Lord, and capable of opening the hearts and minds of many to the desire for God and for true life, life without end."<sup>123</sup>

### **Small Christian Communities in the Diocese of Limburg**

The Church of Limburg sees itself as an active member of a learning community – the universal Church. It is particularly through partnerships with other local churches that we can draw on such an immense wealth of experience. Limburg's partner dioceses in Africa and Asia show lively new beginnings within the Church in the form of Small Christian Communities or Basic Ecclesial Communities. In recent years many German dioceses have begun to take a close look at this pastoral approach.

For thirty years the Church of Limburg has cultivated diocesan partnerships with the global South. It is twinned with the dioceses of Ndola in Zambia (1982), Alaminos in the Philippines (1987) and Kumbo in Cameroon (1988), and with dioceses and archdioceses in eastern and south-eastern Europe. Also, a wide variety of small partnerships are in place at the levels of parishes and church districts.

Over the past ten years the Diocese of Limburg has received a great deal of fresh impetus, all of it inspired – at the level of the universal Church – by an exchange of experiences on those new pastoral beginnings, supported by the missio project "Spirituality and Local Church Development – Small Christian Communities in Germany". One project which focused special attention on the pastoral initiatives of our sister churches was called SPRING, a Church development project that was conducted three times between 2000 and 2006. This project enabled small groups of guests to visit parishes and Church districts in the Diocese of Limburg, where they reported on their

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid., Art. 15.

specific experiences. Arising from this experience of being a learning community within the universal Church and based on a fact-finding visit to the Diocese of Mumbai (India), a number of initial starting points were developed, adopting the concept of Small Christian Communities within the diocese and fulfilling the basic purpose of those communities as outlined here. It turned out to be central to the initiation of Small Christian Communities (not for their ‘foundation’ as spiritual communities!) that some *burning persons*<sup>124</sup> should be won over – local Christians who would generate enthusiasm and take the first steps.

Small Christian Communities have so far formed in four Church districts in the Diocese of Limburg, where they wish to test the idea. In two places the relevant pastoral teams have been commissioned to give active support to the experiment. This approach to pastoral care is expressly supported under a diocesan process called “Prepared to Move”. In August 2010 a five-year project unit was created under Church Development. This has an emphasis on Small Christian Communities and acts as a central point of contact. As well as supporting experimental groups, the unit takes part in a nationwide exchange of experiences and contributes to it.<sup>125</sup> Moreover, a pilot project has been launched in Bierstadt (in Wiesbaden) with the express purpose of exploring further-reaching ideas that will help forthcoming pastoral development processes in the diocese as it seeks to create “parishes of a new type” within its wider local and social context. The main purpose is to derive inspiration from the practice of Small Christian Communities as a way towards the indispensable closeness needed at the local level with its large structures and geographical areas.

The basic idea of Small Christian Communities as outlined in this article – i.e. being a neighbourhood Church – derives its strength from the interaction between the Word and the Sacrament, between gathering and sending out, between the Christian creed and *agape*

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<sup>124</sup> The concept of ‘burning persons’ in this sense was coined in the churches of Asia. See also: Tewes, D., *Das Feuer anblasen*, in: *Unsere Seelsorge*, November 2011, 28.

<sup>125</sup> Mention should also be made in this context of the work of the National Small Christian Communities Team in Germany which has been networking with the various new groups in German dioceses. See: [www.kcg-net.de/](http://www.kcg-net.de/).

(confession and solidarity nourished by faith). In this way it helps the local church to be close to its locality and to accept the challenges we face today. Following the basic principles of these new beginnings within the universal Church, as demonstrated at the local level by Small Christian Communities, Benedict XVI encourages this pastoral initiative: “In our day, all too often marked by incentives to individualism, it is more necessary than ever that Christians offer the witness of a solidarity that crosses every border to build a world in which all feel welcomed and respected. Those who carry out this mission personally or as a community sow the seeds of authentic love, love that sets the heart free and brings everywhere that joy ‘that no one can take away’ because it comes from the Lord.”<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> Benedict XVI, Address to the Members of the Assembly of Organisations for Aid to the Eastern Churches (ROACO), 23 June 2005.

# **Ecclesiological Understanding of Small Christian Communities**



# Small Christian Communities as a New Way of *Becoming Church*: Practice, Progress and Prospects

Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator

We have to insist on building church life and work on Basic Christian Communities in both rural and urban areas. Church life must be based on the communities in which everyday life and work take place: those basic and manageable social groups whose members can experience real inter-personal relationships and feel a sense of communal belonging, both in living and working. (AMECEA Study Conference on “Planning for the Church in Eastern Africa in the 1980s,” Nairobi, Kenya, 1973).

The fortunes and prospects of Small Christian Communities (SCCs) have risen and waned both historically and contextually. Various rendered as “basic ecclesial communities,” “living ecclesial communities,” “basic Christian communities,” “basic church communities,” “vital Christian communities,” “grassroots Christian communities,” “small communities,” or “basic family communities,” SCCs owe their origin to several factors.<sup>127</sup> In Eastern Africa, SCCs emerged in the 1970s as neighborhood associations or groups of Christians, under the auspices of the Association of Member Episcopal Conferences of Eastern Africa (AMECEA).<sup>128</sup> The seminal option

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<sup>127</sup> Apparently there are as many as 3,000 names, expressions, titles and terms for SCCs/BECs. Healey, J./ Hinton, J., Explanation of Terms, in: Healey, J. /Hinton, J. (ed.), *Small Christian Communities Today, Capturing the New Moment*, New York 2005, 8.

<sup>128</sup> Joseph Healey traces the origin of SCCs in Africa to the emergence of “Living Ecclesial Communities” in: Zaire (now DR Congo) in 1961. “Timeline in the History and Development of Small Christian Communities (SCCs) in Africa Especially Eastern Africa.” Available at: <http://www.smallchristiancommunities.org/africa/africa-continent/107-timeline-in-the-history-and-development-of-small-christian-communities-sccs-in-africa-especially-eastern-africa.html>.

by AMECEA to build SCCs as “local churches” inaugurated a new ecclesiological reality in the region.

Initially conceived of as a pastoral strategy of evangelization and inculturation of the church in Africa, SCCs offered alternative ecclesial communities to correct the anonymity and impersonality characteristic of membership in the large parish structure. “SCCs were meant to be cells where the Christian faith would be intensely lived and shared. They were in fact seen as the ecclesiastical extension of the African extended family or clan.”<sup>129</sup> Often described in ecclesiological terms as “church in the neighborhood,”<sup>130</sup> they were to be small enough to facilitate close and meaningful relationship and flexible enough to address a variety of issues in the everyday life of Christians. In brief, SCCs were hailed as a new way of being church and a “church on the move” under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.<sup>131</sup>

The ecclesiological expression of SCCs corresponds to uniquely African values of interdependence, harmony, cooperation and hospitality that are constitutive elements of the human community. Commonly rendered as “Ubuntu”, this anthropological principle grounds the fundamental understanding of person-in-community as wholeness, relationality and solidarity.<sup>132</sup> In light of this understanding, official texts defining SCCs as local churches emphasize the aspects of communal belonging, inter-relationship and a shared vision of and responsibility for the mission of the church in the local context.

As expressions of the church in its local context, there is no exclusive definition of Small Christian Communities. The purposes for such associations vary from place to place, but they follow some

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<sup>129</sup> Magesa, L., *Anatomy of Inculturation, Transforming the Church in Africa*, New York 2004, 43. See also: Cieslikiewicz, G., *Pastoral Involvement of Parish-Based SCCs in Dar es Salaam*, in: Healey, J./ Hinton, J., *Small Christian Communities Today*, 101.

<sup>130</sup> Mejia, R., *The Church in the Neighborhood, Meetings for the Animation of Small Christian Communities*, Nairobi 1992; Omolo, A., *Small Communities Light Up Neighborhoods in Kisumu*, Healey, J./ Hinton, J., *Small Christian Communities Today*, 110-114.

<sup>131</sup> Healey, J./ Hinton, J., *Introduction, A Second Wind*, in: Healey, J./ Hinton, J., *Small Christian Communities Today*, 4, 6.

<sup>132</sup> See: Mason, C., *Why Africa Matters*, New York, 2010, 124-125.

broad patterns in terms of the mode of operation. Typically, outside of the standard parish devotional routine, SCCs meet regularly to pray together and reflect on the word of God. This reflection either anticipates the liturgical readings of the week or focuses on them retrospectively. Besides the reflection on the word of God, SCCs offer a locus for discussing common concerns of the local Christians. Furthermore, they create a forum for members to plan particular activities either in their locality or toward the fulfillment of certain tasks assigned to the SCCs at the level of the parish community. More importantly, the opportunity and occasion to meet as local Christians serve to strengthen the bonds of communion among members of Small Christian Communities.

### **SCCs, CEBs, BECs. . . .: varieties of ecclesiological expressions**

Small Christians Communities are present in various forms in different parts of the world, but they have gained a distinctive ecclesiological notoriety in Latin America. In this wider context the specificity or uniqueness of SCCs in Africa does not appear obvious. In some instances, they have been compared to and confused with the Latin American model of *Comunidades Eclesiales de Base* (CEBs). The similarities between both models of SCCs are noticeable, but the distinctions are clear. The same can be said of the historical trajectory of the two models. On the evidence of history, they are contemporaries, albeit they developed on opposite ends of the globe.<sup>133</sup> Their emergence is coterminous, such that “it would be hard to establish clearly whether one was prior to the other in logic or historical development.”<sup>134</sup>

Some criticisms of SCCs as pale replicas of CEBs or products of the negative influences of CEBs seem unfair and baseless. In the context of African ecclesiology, Oliver Onwubiko has lambasted BECs (or CEBs) as “anti-church” and “anti-institutional church” and claimed “that the BEC developed some specific dim characteristics, ecclesologically speaking, because of lack of priests and priestly supervision.”<sup>135</sup>

<sup>133</sup> See: Healey, Timeline.

<sup>134</sup> Haight, R., *Christian Community in History*, Volume 2, New York 2005, 409.

<sup>135</sup> Onwubiko, O., *The Church in Mission, In the Light of Ecclesia in Africa*, Nairobi 2001, 166-167. See my critique of his position in my: *From Crisis to Kairos, The Mission of the Church in the Time of HIV/AIDS, Refugees and Poverty*, Nairobi 2005, 82.

His criticism, it must be said, is redolent of a theological position that incorrectly assumes institutionalization and clerical control as essential elements of ecclesiological configuration. As I will point out below, clerical control and supervision account for some of the factors militating against SCCs and BECs as actualizations of the church in the local milieu.

Undoubtedly, the Latin American model of CEBs rests on a deeper and much more articulated theology of liberation. This is partly due to the fact that the socio-political and economic context of the Latin American model is very different from that of the African model of Small Christian Communities. Whereas the former developed a strong consciousness and praxis of political engagement in view of resisting systemic and structural forces of oppression and marginalization, such cannot be said for the latter African model, where “social issues are still marginal in the life of SCCs.”<sup>136</sup> “The fact remains that up to now African SCCs have been more effective in prayer and mutual assistance among their members than in the sociopolitical life.”<sup>137</sup> Yet the desire for a more socially relevant and theologically meaningful experience of the community called church remains the shared characteristic of both models.

In considering SCCs in Africa, one needs to pay attention to the context of their evolution and practice. As indicated above, SCCs followed a clearly discernable path of development in Eastern Africa. In particular, they received the approval and endorsement of ecclesiastical leadership. Several official documents of the leadership of the church in Eastern Africa affirm the enduring value, pastoral necessity and ecclesiological status of SCCs in the dioceses and archdioceses of the region. Such ecclesiastical support for SCCs cannot be presumed in the rest of the church in Africa. In West Africa, for example, with a few exceptions, the development of SCCs appears to be less patterned or systematic and more sporadic. In some parts of Nigeria, for example, SCCs are referred to as “zones”. They engage in a variety of activities, including prayer and devotions. Besides the focus on fundraising or planning to take part in the activities of the parish, these “zones” can hardly be called church in the neighborhood in the theological sense

<sup>136</sup> Cieslikiewicz, *Pastoral Involvement of Parish-Based SCCs in Dar es Salaam*, 99.

<sup>137</sup> Cieslikiewicz, *Pastoral Involvement of Parish-Based SCCs in Dar es Salaam*, 103.

of the term, as I have outlined above. In Central Africa region, a form of SCCs has existed since the early 1960s. The emergence of these groups can be attributed to the charismatic Cardinal Joseph Malula who worked tirelessly to promote inculturation of the gospel not only in the context of liturgy (for example, the Zairean Rite of the Roman Missal), but also in the practice of Christian life in concrete context of the parish.<sup>138</sup> In this pastoral context, lay leaders were trained and commissioned to take active responsibility for the organization and leadership of parish life (as “Mokambi” or “head of the parish”), while Christians were encouraged to gather in small communities or living ecclesial communities for the purposes of promoting Christian devotion and providing mutual self-help.<sup>139</sup>

Considered as local churches, SCCs face particular challenges that ought to be understood in the cultural, theological and sociological contexts of these Small Christian Communities. Some of these challenges are evident in the following areas.

### **Gender in the ecclesiological practice of SCCs**

A plethora of studies have observed the tendency of SCCs to attract a predominantly female membership, leaving out the influential male members of the community.<sup>140</sup> “One of the greatest challenges for the communities today is to succeed in getting men involved in the life of SCCs.... It has been noticed that SCCs tend to turn easily into simple prayer groups where the presence of women prevail.”<sup>141</sup>

Besides this gender imbalance, there is a cultural factor. Given the highly patriarchal cultures of Africa, it is difficult, at best, and impossible, at worst, to create and sustain neighborhood Christian communities where women assume leadership positions unhindered or where men

<sup>138</sup> Uzukwu, E., *Worship as Body Language, Introduction to Christian Worship, An Orientation*, Collegeville, Minnesota 1997, 302ff.

<sup>139</sup> See: Healey, Timeline; Léonard Santedi Kinkupu, *Catholic Theology, African Approaches and Elaborations from the Democratic Republic of the Congo*. Available at: <http://theo.kuleuven.be/insect/page/66/>.

<sup>140</sup> See for example: Uzukwu, E., *A Listening Church, Autonomy and Communion in African Churches*, New York, 118.

<sup>141</sup> Cieslikiewicz, *Pastoral Involvement of Parish-Based SCCs in Dar es Salaam*, 101-102. A similar challenge concerns the inclusion of youth in Small Christian Communities or the formation of SCCs of the youth.

would be content to play subsidiary roles. It is not uncommon that where few men participate in SCCs, such men 'naturally' take over the running of the communities; conversely, women tend to or are coerced to acquiesce to the authority of the male members of Small Christian Communities.

Taken together, such cultural factors consistently militate against the functionality and effectiveness of SCCs as loci of ecclesial communion, pastoral cooperation and equal participation. However, viewed from a wider perspective, the higher proportion of female membership of SCCs and their relative lack of effective authority mirrors ministerial practices in the universal church which prioritizes male authority and domination. Notwithstanding this situation, ample room exists for a positive valuation of SCCs as the place where women "assume a voice in a patriarchal culture" as well as relative authority and prominence in the community of the church.<sup>142</sup>

### **Lay leadership of SCCs**

From the perspective of the theology of the church and the sociology of religious organization, SCCs are lay-led and lay-run ecclesial communities. In SCCs, "the laity carry forward the cause of the gospel ... and are the vessels, the vehicles of ecclesial reality even on the level of direction and decision-making."<sup>143</sup> Ideally, under this arrangement, membership includes ordained clergy who participate on equal footing as other lay members. In reality, however, this is rarely the case. Just as male domination of SCCs mirrors practices in the larger ecclesial community and secular society, sometimes the involvement of clergy in SCCs turns them into "clerically supervised community."<sup>144</sup> Consequently, clergy control and domination of the affairs of SCCs undermine their creativity and functionality as a community of lay faithful called to be the church in the neighborhood.

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<sup>142</sup> Haight, *Christian Community*, in: *History*, 419; Nasimiyu-Wasike, A., *The Role of Women in Small Christian Communities*, in: Radoli, A., (ed.), *The Local Church with a Human Face*, Eldoret 1996, 181-202; Radoli, A., (ed.), *How Local is the Local Church? Small Christian Communities and the Church in Eastern Africa*, Eldoret 1993.

<sup>143</sup> Boff, L., *EcclesioGenesis, The Base Communities Reinvent the Church*, New York, 1986, 2.

<sup>144</sup> Uzukwu, *Worship as Body Language*, 31.

A strong rationale for the development and growth of SCCs stems from the fact that they serve as a means of localizing the church. This implies a greater sense of ownership among Christians and increased participation of the laity. Put differently, SCCs represent a form of ecclesiological devolution that allows lay Christians to assume and exercise leadership roles at local level. Accordingly, lay Christians facilitate activities such as catechesis and the planning and preparation for various sacraments. In some parts of sub-Saharan Africa, parish catechetical programmes have been devolved to Small Christian Communities. Each SCCs has its catechist or an equivalent minister responsible for recruiting members for and organizing a variety of sacramental and formational activities and services. For example, besides the Eucharist celebrated on a regular basis in SCCs, sacraments, such as baptism, marriage, anointing of the sick, and burial, are offered through the network of Small Christian Communities. This arrangement gives a vivid expression to SCCs as the church in the neighborhood.

Notwithstanding the observation in the preceding paragraph, in particular instances, the devolution of pastoral and sacrament activities to the SCCs creates a bureaucratic hurdle in which the local catechist and/or local leaders assume the unofficial role of gatekeepers of the sacraments. They are at liberty to impose conditions and create regulations that serve to determine access to certain sacraments by the local Christians. In extreme circumstances, the imposition of conditions and regulations can deteriorate into punitive measures. According to a firsthand account, leaders of one SCC in Tanzania, refused the rite of Christian burial to a deceased member of the SCC on account of his non-attendance at meetings. While this represents an extreme case, other examples include refusal of registration for baptism and wedding for non-payment of dues, fees or levies. In its extreme form, this practice undermines the very essence and rationale of Small Christian Communities as expressions of the church in the local context.

### **Ecclesial identity of SCCs: a new way of being church?**

A related challenge concerns the theological evaluation and precise meaning of the oft-repeated expression that SCCs are a new way of being church. In particular instances, where the parish

structure remains dominant and parish-based devotional groups or sodalities remain vibrant, questions emerge concerning the ecclesiological status of Small Christian Communities. "Indeed, while some dioceses in Eastern Africa see the function of SCCs as replacing the parishes, others do not see the situation in that way."<sup>145</sup> For the most part, however, the parish structure of the church remains widespread and deeply rooted. As a result, "the popularity of pre-SCC parish structure more often than not reduces the SCC to a prayer group instead of a new burgeoning church structure for the renewal of the community and the transformation of society."<sup>146</sup>

Furthermore, taken as expressions of the church in the neighborhood, SCCs contend with particular challenges that are not so evident in a parish-based structure. In SCCs that are situated in areas where a variety of ethnic affiliations and configurations exists, membership can tend to be defined by such considerations as ethnicity and cultural affiliation. Thus, where SCCs are supposed to bridge such gaps, their organization can reinforce the lines of division and separation. The level of belonging and participation of membership would depend on how much members feel at home in the community. The more ethnically homogenous, the deeper the sense of belonging, but also the deeper the level of exclusivity of the group. The temptation for SCCs to develop exclusivist tendencies has been noted and condemned by the two African Synods.<sup>147</sup>

A variant of this tendency of exclusivity of membership along particular ethnic lines exists at a sociological level. Not unlike the

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<sup>145</sup> Uzukwu, A., *Listening Church*, 119; in a similar manner, Boff distinguishes and juxtaposes two "postconciliar" and "post-Medellin" ecclesiological models: a. "the church as grand institution" of dioceses and parishes; b. church as "the network of the basic communities." Both models converge in a "dialectical interaction" of mutual reinforcement and renewal – with the former not seeking to absorb the latter into its bureaucracy nor the latter attempting to replace the former and "present itself as the only way of being church today," 7-9. Also see SCCs as means of renewing and transforming the institutional church, "Introduction: A Second Wind," in: Healey, J., /Hinton, J., *Small Christian Communities Today*, 3.

<sup>146</sup> Uzukwu, A *Listening Church*, 119.

<sup>147</sup> John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Africa (Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation)*, 1995, no. 89; Propositio 35 of the Second African Synod (2009). See also Cieslikiewicz, "Pastoral Involvement of Parish-Based SCCs in Dar es Salaam," 105.

Latin American model, a noticeable feature of SCCs in Africa is that they have tended to draw their membership from the class of the poor and socially disadvantaged: “Small Christian Communities are still the church of the poor and for the poor, helping to create an alternative from the base.”<sup>148</sup> The condition of women has been analyzed above, but the key point here is the difficulty of SCCs to attract a more socially diverse and integrated membership. Membership tends to be socially exclusive – SCCs of the poor organize themselves separately from SCCs of the middle class or the rich. Given the fact that SCCs are organized geographically and in light of the fact that such geographical configurations are also markers of economic and social affiliation, it would be difficult to overcome this challenge.

However, it is important to note that one of the interesting features of SCCs is that they can be intentional communities. This means that geographical or socio-economic boundaries are not rigid lines of demarcation for determining membership. Ideally, the development of more socially diverse and economically integrated Small Christian Communities remains a strong possibility. Unfortunately, where such intentional communities exists, the social and economic bonds have proved stronger than Christian and egalitarian principles. As a result, “despite the support of the hierarchy for this new way of being church, its appeal is more pronounced among the poorer classes than among the middle class.”<sup>149</sup>

### **The future of SCCs as a new way of being church**

Despite the challenges facing SCCs in their self-understanding as “local churches,” it would be patently false to suggest that SCCs do not allow for a positive valuation of the theology and practice of the church in Africa. Several factors suggest positive and bright prospects for SCCs as “kairos” events in the life of the church and “today’s new way of being church from the bottom up.”<sup>150</sup>

Without a doubt, SCCs have facilitated a new understanding and experience of the church in Africa. In local churches where they are

<sup>148</sup> Healey, J. / Hinton, J., Introduction: A Second Wind, 3.

<sup>149</sup> Uzukwu, A., Listening Church, 118.

<sup>150</sup> Healey, J., Twelve Case Studies of Small Christian Communities in Eastern Africa, in: Radoli, How Local is the Local Church?, 96.

integrated into the functioning of the community and, therefore, benefit from the resources of the parishes for leadership, faith formation and empowerment for service and ministry in fields as diverse as children, youth, single mothers, widows, widowers, charitable assistance, health, marriage counseling, support groups, income generating activities, etc., they constitute ecclesologically relevant and beneficial communities. Due to the emergence and growth of SCCs, the church is no longer considered a remote reality subject solely to the direction of the ordained clergy. Whether as CEBs, BECs or SCCs, they “represent for some churches – such as the Roman Catholic Church whose parish congregations can be excessively large – a more effective organizational unit for making God’s word and sacrament relevant to actual everyday life.”<sup>151</sup> As ecclesial communities, they embody the meaning of the church as the community of God’s people and the family of God, where women and men feel a sense of belonging, celebrate their shared faith and take responsibility for the mission of the church in the local context. “The privileged place for translating this model of Church as Family into reality is the Small Christian Community (SCC). The SCC is the church in the neighborhood, which helps to promote communion and co-responsibility, and give every member a sense of belonging.”<sup>152</sup>

In terms of the ecclesiological profile of SCCs in the church, the last two African synods have affirmed the significance of SCCs as essential to the growth of the church in Africa. Although we can expect the level of interest and support to vary from place to place, the warrant supplied by the two synods will boost the ecclesiological profile and development of Small Christian Communities.

The first African Synod (1994) specifically recognized SCCs as the theological mainstay of the model of Church as Family of God. According to the synod, “the Church as Family cannot reach her full potential as Church unless she is divided into communities small enough to foster close human relationships.”<sup>153</sup> Such communities are characterized by their commitment to the proclamation of the

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<sup>151</sup> Haight, *Christian Community in History*, 409.

<sup>152</sup> Orobator, A.E., *Theology Brewed*, in: *An African Pot*, New York 2008, 90-91.

<sup>153</sup> John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Africa*, no. 89.

gospel; they are attentive to the word of God, inclusive of all people, and animate members in taking responsibility for the life and mission of the church in the world.

In the context of the social mission of the church, the Second African Synod (2009) underlined the critical status and role of SCCs as agents, signs, loci, custodians and promoters of reconciliation, justice and peace. “Together with the parish, the SCCs and the movements and associations can be helpful places for accepting and living the gift of reconciliation offered by Christ our peace. Each member of the community must become a ‘guardian and host’ to the other: this is the meaning of the sign of peace in the celebration of the Eucharist.”<sup>154</sup> Several Episcopal conferences and diocese have underlined these aspects of the ecclesiological roles of SCCs in their particular contexts and circumstances.

Furthermore, theologians are taking keener interests in the function, theology and development of Small Christian Communities. More than ever before, there is a growing corpus of theological scholarship devoted to Small Christian Communities.<sup>155</sup> This suggests a growing theological expertise in the theology and practice of SCCs in the church. An offshoot of this increased level of theological interest and scholarship dedicated to SCCs is the fact that they are being integrated into the mainstream of theological education in seminaries and theological faculties and colleges in Africa. Examples are not hard to find. At least two theological colleges and faculties in Nairobi, Kenya, offer compulsory courses on Small Christian Communities. In one college, the theology of SCCs is an elective or optional course.

Finally, SCCs have become the loci of ecclesial mission and identity. The gathering of Christians in the neighborhood is not only in the name of the church but *is* church. In their localization and specificity, SCCs actualize the mission of the church as both “sign and agent of the kingdom of God”; in other words, “these small ‘churches’ empower

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<sup>154</sup> Benedict XIV, *Africae Munus* (Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation), 2011, no. 134; see no. 169 and no. 131.

<sup>155</sup> Key monographs include Healey, J. /Hinton, J., *Small Christian Communities Today*; Radoli, *The Local Church with a Human Face; How Local is the Local Church?*; Healey, J., *Building the Church as Family of God, Evaluation of Small Christian Communities in Eastern Africa*. Available at: [www.smallchristiancommunities.org](http://www.smallchristiancommunities.org).

Christian existence in active, Christian subjects, and this manifests itself in concrete ways.”<sup>156</sup> In this way, at their best, SCCs internalize, embody and exemplify the radical meaning of the theological insight that the church is a community of the people, for the people and by the people.

### **Conclusion: SCCs as communion and mission**

In Eastern Africa, where SCCs have continued to thrive in their thousands, some members have developed a unique formula for greeting one another: one member calls out: “*Jumuia Ndogondogo!*” (‘Small Christian Community!’); the other responds: “*Roho mmoja, Moyo mmoja katika Kristu!*” (‘One spirit, one heart in Christ’). Communion of heart and spirit is central to the ecclesiological comprehension of Small Christian Communities. Their existence reflects the notion of the church as a communion of communities. Although part of the rationale for their existence is the fostering of close inter-personal relationship and communal belonging, they are not closed communities. Essentially, they are communities for mission: announcing the Good News in the local context of the community called church.

Although some would argue that SCCs have never really fulfilled their potential as the expression of the church alive and active in the local context of the Christian community, a definitive judgment on their success or failure would appear premature. In Africa, SCCs have experienced at least four decades of development and growth as the local embodiment of the meaning, theology and function of the church. Understandably, the rate of success varies from region to region. The initial enthusiastic proclamation of SCCs as the catalyst of a global ecclesiological renaissance has met with the realism of established ecclesial structures and hierarchical propensity for the preservation of the tried and tested pastoral strategies of evangelization and inculturation.<sup>157</sup> Thus, in assessing the fulfillment of the promise of SCCs, it is important to take a long view and affirm with Boff that “this is still

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<sup>156</sup> Haight, *Christian Community in History*, 417.

<sup>157</sup> At the height of the flourishing of CEBs, Latin American liberation theologians referred to them using the evocative term ‘ecclesiogenesis’. Boff, *Ecclesiogenesis*, 2; see 4.

just beginning, still in process. It is not accomplished reality.”<sup>158</sup> Small Christian Communities represent a way of *becoming* church; they are not a finished product or prefabricated ecclesial reality. In this sense, *process* takes precedence over *event* as key markers of the ecclesiological comprehension of Small Christian Communities.

The significant factors of the future development of SCCs include the level and nature of interest from ecclesiastical leadership, the commitment to the formation and empowerment of the lay faithful and the relative strength of negative socio-economic and cultural factors, some of which have been outlined above. Along with the need for ongoing critical reflection on the present organization and practices of SCCs, much still needs to be done to develop the theology of Small Christian Communities as church in the neighborhood. This theology ought to facilitate the expansion of the missionary focus of SCCs to include attention to socio-political, ecological and economic conditions of their context. In this vein, SCCs in Africa would have much to learn from the history and praxis of the Latin American model, while, at the same time, developing a distinctively African model of Small Christian Communities as a new way of becoming church.

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<sup>158</sup> Boff, *EcclesioGenesis*, 2.



# An Ecclesiological Approach to Small Christian Communities – An ecclesiology that promotes and supports them

Barbara Sweet-Hansen

“But what are today’s churches if not just tombs  
and pantheons of God?”<sup>159</sup>

Friedrich Nietzsche

It is fascinating to approach Nietzsche’s essay “The Madman” with its assertion that “God is dead” from a hermeneutic perspective. Our postmodern epoch is witnessing a search for coherence amidst distraction accompanied by atomism.

It may be that “The Madman” represents coherence, a notion I find stimulating. It brings to life the persuasive words and careers of such people as Oscar Arnulfo Romero, Ignacio Ellacuría, Gustavo Gutiérrez, Jon Sobrino, Leonardo Boff, Helder Câmara, Pedro Casaldáliga, Ernesto Cardenal and so many other ‘madmen’ (and ‘madwomen’) who still exist, even if they are condemned to silence), who have left the pantheon to seek God and Jesus in the wider church formed by the street, the neighbourhood, the slums and the suburbs,

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<sup>159</sup> Nietzsche, F., *Der tolle Mensch*, in: idem, *Gesammelte Werke, Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, Munich, 1924, Section 125. The statement that “God is dead” and the equally well-known formulation of the “death of God” is usually attributed to the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. However, it appeared earlier in Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel’s *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, in: *Gesammelte Werke*, edited by Bonsiepen, W. / Heede, R., Vol. 9, Hamburg, 1980, 435. Here reference has been made to: *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft* (“The Gay Science”) Section 108 (“New Struggles”), Section 125 (“The Madman”) and Section 343 (“On the Meaning of Our Cheerfulness”). These texts are also to be found in Thus spake Zarathustra, the book we have to thank for the wide dissemination of this expression.

while at the same time pointing up the solution to the present day's manifest paradox of cognitive dissonance. In so doing, they wish to put an end to an epoch of despair and suffering and open the door to laughter, prosperity and plenty so that everyone with restored dignity can taste their freedom and jump for joy – in our shared home on Mother Earth as it spins through the infinity of the universe.<sup>160</sup>

These voices cry out together with those who, like the 'madman', are trying to tell us with their hoarse and scarcely audible sounds that for them God is dead and Jesus, too, because we have thrust them aside and forgotten them. But there are other, bolder voices whose owners tell us with their lives: No! There is good news. These people are telling us that the legacy of Jesus of Nazareth, who lived in poverty among the poor, must spur us on to do all in our power to redefine 'church'.

These people were able to 'reinvent' an ecclesiology. They did so by reviving historical models from the remote past, returning to the original meaning of the term 'church' and risking their lives by bearing living witness in order to produce a model that is to be found in the street, among simple folk, and in the vastness of the Kingdom of God.

We shall briefly recall a very broad and general definition of ecclesiology – even at the risk of repeating something that for many goes without saying – before proceeding to take a closer look at three perspectives that will help us to present the ecclesiology that sustains the small communities. They are the following:

- the perspective of the 'founding tradition' or the historical path that leads to the definition of an ecclesiology;
- the perspective of the ecclesiastical models which, inspired by the Second Vatican Council and the synods of bishops of Medellín and Puebla,<sup>161</sup> call for a radical leap in the identity of the church itself, and
- the perspective of those who risk their lives to build bridges...

<sup>160</sup> Cf. Luke 6:20-26: "The Beatitudes".

<sup>161</sup> The documents are accessible in Sekretariat der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz (ed.), *Die Kirche Lateinamerikas. Dokumente der 2. und 3. Generalversammlung des latein-amerikanischen Episkopates in Medellín and Puebla (6.9.1968 / 13.2.1979)*, *Stimmen der Weltkirche*, no. 8, Bonn, n.d. (translator's note)

In conclusion we shall take a closer look at the title of this paper: “Ecclesiological Understanding of Small Christian Communities or Basic Ecclesial Communities”.

### Understanding the term ecclesiology

The term ecclesiology comes from the Greek word *ekklesia*, which in turn is composed of two parts: *ek* = outside the group, and *kaléo* = to call. In ancient times the term *ekklesia* was used to designate a group of people who were summoned to take part in a public meeting. The type of meeting was not important.<sup>162</sup> From a secular or political perspective ‘the summoning of the citizens’ implied that the Attic *ekklesia* was a meeting at which the overwhelming majority of participants remained silent.<sup>163</sup>

In this secular-political context the *agora*, according to John Stuart Mill, was interpreted not only as a physical presence, but as a totality of ‘voices’ which were represented proportionally.<sup>164</sup>

In the writings of the Covenant two Hebrew terms are used to designate the meeting of God’s Chosen People, the Israelites. The term *edhah*, whose secular meaning referred to the grain or wine harvests, also describes the group formed to carry out a specific task. Its root means ‘assemble’ or simply ‘assembly’. In the translation of the Septuagint the Hebrew word *edhah* is translated as *sinagoga* or ‘bring together’. Later, in the revised versions, ‘assembly’ (or in the

<sup>162</sup> Ekklesiologie, in: <http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ekklesiologie>.

<sup>163</sup> The basic principle of Attic democracy consisted in the *isegoria* or the individual’s right to speak at a meeting. The *prytanes* introduced a system of remuneration in cash so as to ensure attendance and not to enable people to speak. *Prytanes* were members of the fifty advisory commissions formed out of the 500-member Senate and held the presidency of the Senate for about a tenth of the year. These details are taken from a monograph by Bishop Ruben González Medina, *La iglesia local: la reunión de los “cuerpos” como el símbolo dinámico de la encarnación*, Caguas, 2005. Quoted with express permission of the author.

<sup>164</sup> Cf. Mill, J. S., *Considerations on Representative Government*, in: *idem, On Liberty and Other Essays*, edited by Grey, J, Oxford/New York 1991. It should be noted that the meeting in the *Agora* claimed the right to inspect the ‘Executive’, make its activities public, demand a justification of these activities, and finally even the right to censure the politicians and remove them from public office. This implied a power of control designed to ensure the ‘freedom of the nation’.

verbal form ‘to assemble’) is used. The other Hebrew term is *tahal*, whose root means ‘to call’ or ‘to call together’.<sup>165</sup> This means that those who are called or summoned assemble at the designated location for a specific purpose.

In this way the Greeks combined the meanings of these terms and gave them an additional and more differentiated meaning than that of the Hebrew harvest or the mere assembling of citizens in a city-state. In doing so they re-interpreted their definitions of *ekklesia* and *ágora*. *Ágora* and *ekklesia* were to be translations that somehow assumed the external written form as understood from the Hebrew writings. As so often happens with translations, the particular meaning of these external written forms in the original language was lost in the course of translation.

### Definition of ‘ecclesiology’ in the light of theological history

Since the earliest dialogues of Genesis, the sacrifice of the Covenant in Exodus (24:3-8), and the promises of the prophets to the table fellowship of Jesus of Nazareth (Mark 2:15-16; 6: 34-37; 15:40-41; Luke 15:2; 14:12-24; 7:31-32...) we find God taking the initiative in gathering his people and entering into a dialogue with them. This means that it is not just a question of physical, silent and passive presence, but of a real dialogue which assumes an ‘oral’ exchange and hence a relationship of mutuality. The various examples to be found in the biblical texts make it clear how anxious God is to do this. How does it come about that the ecclesiastical and secular authorities are re-interpreting this original and fundamental gesture of God’s?

Early sources contain indications of the existence of sites for meetings at the gates of settlements where, among other things, the law was read and discussed. This led to assemblies being tied to specific sites: in Hebrew these meeting sites were called *Bet Knesset*, while *Bet Midrash* – in Greek *oikos paideia* – referred to the sites of meetings with a more or less didactic purpose.<sup>166</sup> In Palestine a Greek form of voluntary organization was introduced. Thus there arose the

<sup>165</sup> Cf. Peláez del Rosal, J., *La Sinagoga*, Córdoba, 1988.

<sup>166</sup> Cf. Runesson, A., *The Nature and Origins of the 1st Century Synagogue*, in: [http://www.bibleinter.com/articles/Runesson-1st-Century\\_Synagogue\\_1.htm](http://www.bibleinter.com/articles/Runesson-1st-Century_Synagogue_1.htm), retrieved on 22 March 2012.

institution of the synagogue with a clearly defined purpose: reading and studying the Torah.<sup>167</sup>

The terms *sunagoge* or *proseuche* refer to the places for the meeting or the study of the Torah. By the first century A.D. the synagogue was designated as an official institution with its own hierarchy of office-holders.<sup>168</sup>

Following the establishment of the synagogue as an institution a dispute broke out among the populace about who should be admitted to the formal synagogue and who should not.<sup>169</sup> The need of the rural population to continue to cultivate their religious practices led to the setting up of what were known as 'prayer houses', which were open to the common people and any who were marginalized for social or religious reasons.<sup>170</sup>

In this difficult context we encounter in the scriptures the *ish ha'Elohim*,<sup>171</sup> or men of God, who at that time and under the then prevailing circumstances had the gift of performing certain acts for the benefit of the people – not through any merit of their own, but because of their special proximity to God when it came to easing the lot of the poor.<sup>172</sup> The various titles attributed to Jesus in the scriptures correspond exactly to those of these holy men<sup>173</sup> to such an extent that it was possible to say about Jesus of Nazareth that he was an exceptional and charismatic Galilean *Jasid*. The Hellenistic influence

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<sup>167</sup> Cf. Horsley, R., *Galilee - History, Politics, People*, Valley Forge, 1995, 22-231. Cf. Anders Runesson, o. cit.

<sup>168</sup> Cf. *ibid.*

<sup>169</sup> It should be noted that the laws on cleanliness and patronage excluded those who could not claim any family relations or patronage, as well as the sick, women, etc. Cf. Malina, B., *The Social Gospel of Jesus, The Kingdom of God in Mediterranean Perspective*, Minneapolis 2001.

<sup>170</sup> Cf. Horsley, R.A., o. cit.

<sup>171</sup> Vermès, G., *Jesus in his Jewish Context*, Minneapolis 2003; *idem*, *Jesus in the Jewish World*, London 2010 (especially Chapter 2: "Jesus the Jew and His Religion", 18-30). See also: Segal, J.B., *Popular Religion in Ancient Israel*. Manuscript of a paper given at the Society for Old Testament Study, Manchester, on 26 July 1973; see especially 20-22.

<sup>172</sup> People like 'Elias' are mentioned, and Honi and Hanania ben Dosa as direct benefactors of humanity and mediators of God, with whom they have a particularly close relationship. *Ibid.* 21.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.* 18-30 and Segal, o. cit.

notwithstanding, the religion, the oral tradition and the childhood of Jesus were Jewish and subject to the Jewish laws and their provisions, albeit more in the natural or popular religious than in the formal sense [...].<sup>174</sup>

It is against this background that the cry breaks forth of those demanding a Messiah who will bring the Kingdom of God... There is an interesting document that explains this cry.

“The Talmud contains an expression which means: ‘to force an issue’. This means (in the literal sense), to force God to send the Messiah – the Kingdom of God – down to earth. Judaism has, in its time, entertained various notions about the coming of the Messiah [...]. Some think he will come on the day of Tisha B’Av, the memorial day of the destruction of the two temples, and will therefore be a nationalist Messiah. Another possible date is the first day of Tishra, the day on which God created humankind, which moves others to think he will be a universal Messiah.”<sup>175</sup>

The zealots in the Jewish War and the Bar Kokhba Revolt attempted to ‘force the issue’. Their expectation was directed towards political liberation. Jesus tried to bring the Kingdom of Heaven. For the Jews of 2000 years ago political freedom was a religious ideal. There was no separation of church and state. All were activists for the Kingdom of God – some, like the followers of Judas the Galilean and his descendants, decided in favour of violence, while others, like Jesus, did not.<sup>176</sup>

The circumstances described above make it clear that there is a natural human inclination to join forces and that this tendency persists. This is a profound value that speaks to us from the depths of the collective consciousness and which we experience as a call, a summons, to rally round. It is as if the coming together of human beings, for whatever purpose, is an element that binds identity to a larger entity.<sup>177</sup>

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<sup>174</sup> Ibid. 21.

<sup>175</sup> Cf. Reiss, M., Christianity, A Jewish Perspective, in: [http://www.moshereiss.org/christianity/02\\_tradition/02\\_tradition.htm](http://www.moshereiss.org/christianity/02_tradition/02_tradition.htm), retrieved on 22 March 2012.

<sup>176</sup> Cf. *ibid.*

<sup>177</sup> Of interest in this connection is the valuable and wide-ranging study by Hans de Wit

In that social situation and borne by the cry for liberation by the hoped-for Messiah the ‘incarnation’ comes to pass, as it has been handed down to us by the Christian tradition or by the post-Easter version of the first communities.

Jesus burst into this world and gave the whole epoch new life with a radical style and a completely different way of interpreting Jewish law and understanding contemporary society. Luke places the beginning of Jesus’ activities in the context of a liberation/healing in the ‘here and now’. Luke 4:14-21 is a key text and ends with the statement: “This text is being fulfilled today even while you are listening.”

Against the background of the preceding explanations we understand *ekklesia*, or church, to mean a space, a human collective, a meeting of individual human beings with voices, as a conceptual notion which has been analysed in the light of various interpretative theories, has experienced a development and possesses a meaning that crystallized in the New Testament with the connotation of ‘being summoned’ and the ‘Christian community’ which, according to some interpretations, extends right up into our own time.

The reports in the four gospels arouse in us the desire to follow this man who, because of his exceptional proximity to God – whom he called Father – exercised such a great influence on a society torn by claims to power. Jesus died because he had become a threat to these claims. His first followers of both sexes were left behind, sad and confused.

Pablo Richard comments on this idyllic story which the Apostles have served up to us as follows. “It gives a false picture of the beginnings of Christianity as a single movement with a single institutional structure and a single body of doctrine which is supposed to have split up into all directions only later.”<sup>178</sup> The image of the Body of Christ, to which Paul appeals, is an attempt to integrate the differences.

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with the significant title: *En la dispersión el texto es patria*, Vols. 1 and 2: *Introducción a la hermenéutica clásica, moderna y posmoderna*, San José, 2002. What unites us in the Diaspora, what unites us in our postmodern, distracted and atomized world?

<sup>178</sup> Richard, P., *Los diversos orígenes del cristianismo, Una visión de conjunto (30-70 d.C.)*, in: Pixley, J.V. et al. (ed.), *Cristianismos originarios (30-70 d.C.)*, *Revista de Interpretación Bíblica Latinoamericana*, vol. 22, Quito, 1996, 7-20.

González Faus expresses this as follows: “The New Testament offers no uniform and obligatory model for structuring the church (let alone one handed down by Jesus or the Apostles). It only offers various examples of how different churches structured themselves in response to the needs and requirements of various historical models. [...]”<sup>179</sup>

The fact that this movement and the emergent communities were able to spread out at the fringes of the prevailing power structures seems hard to explain.

In the third century there were Christian centres in southern Spain, southern France and the British Isles with their own local bishops. The persecutions they were exposed to, however, soon forced the Christians to flee, which resulted in the rapid dissemination of the Christian message. This made it essential to structure the communities and introduce various offices. Rome, the site of the martyrdoms of Peter and Paul, was regarded as the centre. Ignatius of Antioch recognized the church of Rome as the guardian and dispenser of the ‘agape’.<sup>180</sup>

The following centuries were spent in strengthening the identity of the Church, both in a structural and legal sense and in its theological and spiritual aspects. To this end the communities, which had been largely autonomous, subordinated themselves to the central authority of Rome. In doing so they had every intention of organizing and standardizing their unwavering devotion to the gospel of Jesus. The fight against heresies, the official confirmation of the future canon of the New Testament and the Christological definitions, and the final recognition of Rome as the highest political and military power tell

<sup>179</sup> González Faus, J.I., *Hombres de la comunidad*, Apuntes sobre el ministerio eclesial, Santander, 1989, 30.

<sup>180</sup> ‘Ignatius of Antioch’, in: *The Encyclopaedia Britannica*, ([http://www.britannica.com/eb/article? tocId=3478](http://www.britannica.com/eb/article?tocId=3478)), retrieved on 23 March 2012). “Irenaeus of Lyons and Cyprian of Carthage confirmed their adherence to the Catholic faith, and this meant their assent to the See of Rome. The Epistles of Cyprian of Carthage offer a wealth of information on one of the most interesting moments in the history of the Church. Although the persecution continued, the ethical and theological positions laid down in the collection *To Quirinus: Three Books of Testimonies* (*Testimoniorum libri tres ad Quirinum*) were confirmed. In the document *On the Unity of the Catholic Church* (*De catholicae ecclesiae unitate*) Cyprian explained the meaning and the spirit of early Christianity.”

of the problems they were facing, although these did not manage to obliterate the central message altogether, even if it did suffer a loss of clarity under the pressure of events.

The conquistadors were to have brought the Christian message to the New World, but they did so in a spirit of occupation and colonization which had more to do with oppression and slavery than the Glad Tidings of the Kingdom of God as preached by Jesus. They brought in their sea chests a collection of dogmas, rites and laws which even questioned the humanity of the original inhabitants of these exotic climes. The history of Latin America and the Caribbean is a history of manipulation, blood, suffering, oppression, corrupt rulers, capitulations to big landowners and struggles for survival. Latin America was defined as a 'Third World', with all that the term implies. For the Church Latin America suddenly became an 'area of missionary activity'. Its dealings with the native inhabitants were largely characterized by paternalism and condescension. Not until the Second Vatican Council would it contribute to a qualitative leap forward. From this moment on the Latin American church gained in awareness and maturity. It began, in fact, to open its eyes and its ears.

### The ecclesiastical models

In his work *Teología Práctica*<sup>181</sup> Casiano Floristán Samanes gives a historical chronicle of the authors who developed the various structural and spiritual notions designed to explain the development of the identity of the Church. We shall permit ourselves to emphasize those elements which, in our opinion, form or express the ecclesiological model on which today's Small Christian Communities, or CEBs, are based. The term 'paradigm' is more comprehensive than the term 'model', especially as this is an attempt to put the approaches suggested by the paradigm into practice.

Hans Küng proposes six major paradigms:<sup>182</sup> the proto-Christian/Jewish eschatological paradigm; the ancient Hellenistic/Byzantine paradigm; the mediaeval Roman Catholic paradigm; the Protestant

<sup>181</sup> Floristán Samanes, C., *Teología Práctica, Teoría y Praxis de la Acción Pastoral*, Salamanca, 1993.

<sup>182</sup> Küng, H., *Camibos de modelo de Iglesia en la marcha del pueblo de Dios*, in: <http://servicioskoinonia.org/relat/265.htm>, 2 February 2005.

Reform; *the paradigm of the Enlightened Modern Age*; and, finally, *the paradigm of the Post-enlightened, Postmodern Age*.<sup>183</sup>

Marins and his research team<sup>184</sup> have presented six models for discussion: the Church as institution; the Church as sacrament; the Church as Word; the Church as ministry; the Church as community and liberation; and *the Church of the people, a liberating and Easter community*, which is reflected in the Basic Ecclesial Communities of Latin America and is in keeping with the five models presented by Avery Dulles: the Church as perfect society; the Church as mystic community; the model of the sacramental Church; the model of the promulgating Church; and the *model of the ministerial Church*.

The descriptions presented by Dulles<sup>185</sup> are based on a multidisciplinary study of the changes that have taken place in the theology of the Church in the course of its history. They represent a development which acts as a guide for interpreting the model derived from the Second Vatican Council.

With regard to the 'ecclesiastical practice' of Latin America, Leonardo Boff describes four models: the Church as *civitas Dei* (totality *ad intra*); the Church as *Mater et Magistra* (former colonial pact); the Church as *sacramentum salutis* (modernization of the Church); and the Church of the poor (a new model of liberation theology and practice).<sup>186</sup>

Joaquín Losada Espinosa, on the other hand, distinguishes four models of the Church: the exorcist Church; the Church as Ark of the Covenant; the Church as *Mater et Magistra*; and *the prophetic and ministerial church*.<sup>187</sup> Victor Codina enumerates three models: a pre-Council model;<sup>188</sup> a Council model rooted in the community or a

<sup>183</sup> Ibid.

<sup>184</sup> Cf. Marins, J. et al., *Modelos de Iglesia, CEB en América Latina, Hacia un modelo liberador*, Bogotá, 1976, 40, quoted after Casiano Floristán Samanes, o. cit.

<sup>185</sup> Cf. Dulles, A., *Models of the Church*, Dublin, 1988.

<sup>186</sup> Cf. Boff, L., *Kirche, Charisma und Macht, Studien zu einer streitbaren Ekklesiologie*, Düsseldorf 1985, 15-30.

<sup>187</sup> Cf. Losada Espinosa, J., *Distintas imágenes de la Iglesia*, Madrid, 1983, 23-52, quoted after Casiano Floristán Samanes, o. cit.

<sup>188</sup> Cf. Codina, V., *Tres modelos de ecclesiología*, in: *Estudios Eclesiásticos* 58 (1983), 55-82.

charismatic-communal model; a post-Council model as exemplified by Medellín and Puebla, and a *historically liberating model of the Church of the poor and oppressed*.

This demonstration of the diversity of ecclesiastical models requires us not only to analyse the individual models, but also to draw conclusions from their practical application, but that would take us beyond the scope of the present paper. This highlights the option of the synods of Medellín and Puebla: Medellín takes the clear and straightforward option of going *with* the poor, whereas Puebla dilutes this option somewhat, while basically retaining the option *for* the poor. Medellín revives the original and unusual decision taken by forty bishops in the Catacomb Pact under the exhaustive title “For a Poor and Ministerial Church”.<sup>189</sup> “The light for the nations” of this original biblical option has been gradually extinguished and, with the exception of some “madmen and women” [although the reference is again to Nietzsche, the German word *toll* (= mad) is used informally in modern German to mean ‘great’ or ‘wonderful’. Tr. note], the option for a triumphalist Church generates a palpable tension which could lead to a split.

“After Puebla,” said José Comblin, “there began the Church of silence. The Church had nothing more to say.”<sup>190</sup> Santo Domingo<sup>191</sup> meant an about-turn and an attempt at a Neo-Christendom. In this

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The pre-Council model is described by Antonio José de Almeida as an institutionally hierarchical ecclesiastical model. Cf. Modelos eclesiológicos e ministerios eclesiais, in: Revista Eclesiástica Brasileira 48 (1988) 310-352, quoted after Casiano Floristán Samanes, o. cit.

<sup>189</sup> Comblin, J., La Iglesia de los pobres y la experiencia de Dios, in: <http://www.cristianismeimondavui.org/vincles/ponenciaProzent20/Prozent20Comblin.pdf>, retrieved on 24 March 2012. See: “Der Katakombenpakt” in: <http://www.konzilsvaeter.de/referenzen/deutsch/index.html>, retrieved on 24 March 2012. Cf. also: <http://blogs.periodistadigital.com/contracorriente.php/2010/05/06/p269890> as well as <http://stefansilber.blogspot.com/2010/04/eine-neue-seite-zum-ii-vatikanischen.html>.

<sup>190</sup> José Comblin quoted after Jon Sobrino in the article, El Pacto de las Catacumbas, on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the birth of Dom Helder Câmara, in: <http://evangelizadorasdelosapostoles.wordpress.com/2010/03/04/el-pacto-de-las-catatumbas/>, retrieved on 23 March 2012.

<sup>191</sup> Cf. CELAM, Neue Evangelisierung, Förderung des Menschen, Christliche Kultur. Schlußdokument der 4. Generalversammlung der lateinamerikanischen Bischöfe in Santo Domingo, Stimmen der Weltkirche, no. 34, Bonn 1993.

connection Oscar Elizalde remarked: A small, but significant proof of the profound breach this entailed (he was referring to Santo Domingo) is reflected in the following quotation: “The parish is called upon to be a community of communities and movements (Santo Domingo, no. 58).” And he continued: “This clearly shows that in Santo Domingo the CEBs are allocated to the same category as the movements and subsumed under the same identity. In other words, it is assumed that the Church is both community and movements. We are left doubting whether the neo-conservative movements are also backers of the communion.”<sup>192</sup>

According to Comblin, Aparecida<sup>193</sup> has applied the brakes slightly, but in a Church that has not yet performed that “historical turnaround” which Ellacuría called for to heal a seriously sick society. This means that we must return to being a Church of the poor and work towards that goal. Since the death of Mgr. Romero the situation in San Salvador has grown markedly worse, making the necessity of a restoration of the Church greater than ever.

### **How is this necessary restoration of the Church to be understood?**

It is the testimonials of the ‘madmen and madwomen’ who, armed with a new understanding, ventured forth into an absolute vacuum, that enable us to understand the restoration of the Church, which is still going through a process of atrophy. All depends on life itself, which will force a change of style, as is shown by these testimonials. The key to their understanding lies in going to and experiencing these

<sup>192</sup> Elizalde, O., *Eclesiología Pueblo de Dios – Comunión de Medellín a Aparecida*. (This text came into our possession without any further information than that given here.) It is also worth reading the text *Aparecida: Renacer de una esperanza*, in the presentation of which D. Demetrio Valentini had the following to say: “At the beginning of the conference the Basic Ecclesial Communities ran up against the pig-headedness of some who even wished to suppress any mention of them, but they were finally included in the document as a way of life, even if this chapter has now undergone profound changes as a result of the inserted modifications.” This digital book belongs to the Fundación Amerindia, which is making it publicly available free of charge and allowing it to be shared with others, printed out and disseminated at [http://www.hechoreligioso.net/Proyectos/VCELAM/docuVCELAM/206\\_AmerindiaAparecidaLibroVirtual.pdf](http://www.hechoreligioso.net/Proyectos/VCELAM/docuVCELAM/206_AmerindiaAparecidaLibroVirtual.pdf), retrieved on 23 March 2012.

<sup>193</sup> Cf. CELAM, *Aparecida 2007. Schlußdokument der 5. Generalversammlung des Episkopates von Lateinamerika und der Karibik, Stimmen der Weltkirche*, no. 41, Bonn, 2007.

‘theological sites’, in probing the reality of people’s lives, where the subjects of the Beatitudes are to be found and where the Kingdom of God somehow does shimmer through – with all that that implies. Evidently there is a moving force, a spirit and a Holy Spirit emanating from the Scriptures, which expands our consciousness and grants us special knowledge.

Ignacio Ellacuría takes up the question of the meaning of the ‘body’, which we proposed for discussion at the beginning of these remarks in the following sense: “Let us say quite bluntly: the historical form of the Church implies that in it the reality and the acts of Jesus Christ ‘assume physical shape’ so as to constitute an ‘incorporation’ of Jesus Christ in the historical reality. [...] ‘Assume physical shape’ refers to a series of interrelated structured aspects. It means [...] that something is physically present and really makes itself so present, for only a physical presence is really a presence; it also means that something makes itself more real through the very fact that it assumes physical form and manifests itself by becoming something else without ceasing to be what it was; furthermore it means that something gains actuality in the sense that we ascribe the actuality of the body to the person; and, finally, it means that something, which did not use to be such, is now in a position to act. From a theological point of view ‘assuming physical shape’ corresponds to the ‘becoming flesh’ of the Word so that it can be seen and touched, so that it can intervene in the actions of human beings in an entirely historical way [...]”<sup>194</sup>

The ethical significance of incarnation is shown to us by Ignacio Ellacuría, whose text has just been quoted, and whose life and work cannot be summed up in a single quotation. On this basis we shall now let pass in review the many witnesses who may serve as a bridge between the Church as an institution, with its tendency to involution, and the ‘beatified’ individuals who yearn for their liberation and who, for their part, define ecclesiology as the binding link, the universalizable, the general that is adopted by the small communities or CEBs and which comes into being there.<sup>195</sup>

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<sup>194</sup> Ellacuría, I., *Conversión de la Iglesia al Reino de Dios para anunciarlo y realizarlo en la historia*, Santander, 1984, 183.

<sup>195</sup> In order not to exceed the scope of this paper we shall select a few names and deal in detail only with Mgr. Romero. At the same time, however, we acknowledge the Latin

### Mgr. Oscar Arnulfo Romero<sup>196</sup>

In his three-year tenure as Archbishop of San Salvador, Romero faithfully set forth the pastoral options of the Latin American bishops at their Medellín and Puebla conferences. His pastoral letters and other texts reveal a new way of being a 'Church of the poor'.

The first pastoral letter affirms that the Church must be an 'Easter sacrament'. This means a Church that "does not live for itself, but whose destiny is that of Jesus: a service for the world, as formulated in *Gaudium et Spes* 3."<sup>197</sup> Romero confirms that Medellín was a true Whitsun on the Latin American continent.<sup>198</sup> "A Paschal and a Pentecostal Church must be a Church of new direction, of fundamental submission to Christ, whose simple transparency we want to share, and to the radical demands of the Sermon on the Mount."<sup>199</sup>

His second pastoral letter depicts a situation of martyrdom and persecution caused by his faithful pursuit of the aim of being the "body of Christ in our history".<sup>200</sup> The Church goes out of itself, incarnates itself in the world and in history.<sup>201</sup> In clear accordance with the Second Vatican Council, Romero went on to affirm: "The Church is in the world in order to demonstrate and realize *the liberating love of God which appeared in Christ*. That is why it feels the special concern

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American martyrs and other individuals who strove valiantly to restore an ecclesiology that comes from the communities and sustains them.

<sup>196</sup> Cf. Coto, L., La Eclesiología en el pensamiento de Mons. Oscar A. Romero, in: La Prensa Gráfica, 13 September 1971.

<sup>197</sup> Romero, O.A., Primera Carta Pastoral, Iglesia de la Pascua, 4 April 1977, in: Coto, L. (ed.), Mons. Oscar A. Romero, Escritos Pastorales, San Salvador, 2000.

<sup>198</sup> Cf. Coto, L., La Eclesiología en el pensamiento de Mons. Oscar A. Romero, o. cit.; See also idem. (ed.), Mons. Oscar A. Romero, Su Pensamiento, vol. 2, San Salvador, 2000, 19-20.

<sup>199</sup> Coto, L. (ed.), Mons. Oscar A. Romero, Escritos Pastorales, Salvador 2000, 211. Cf. also Mgr. Oscar A. Romero, Primera Carta Pastoral, Iglesia de la Pascua, in: Coto, L. (ed.), Mons. Oscar A. Romero, Su Pensamiento, o. cit.

<sup>200</sup> Romero, O.A., Segunda Carta Pastoral, La Iglesia, Cuerpo de Cristo en la historia, 10 April 1977, in: Coto, L. (ed.), o. cit., 25.

<sup>201</sup> Before the murder of Mgr. Romero the church of El Salvador had lost six priests, many pastoral workers, lay missionaries and delegates and celebrants of the Word (delegados y celebradores de la Palabra), catechists and sacristans. They were all murdered. Many Protestant brothers, sisters, pastors, deacons and preachers were murdered with them.

of Christ for the poor (*Lumen Gentium* 8). For, as Medellín explained, they confront “the Latin American Church with a challenge and an evangelizing mission that it cannot evade and to which it must respond with intelligence and a boldness appropriate to the urgency of the moment’ (Poverty, 7).”<sup>202</sup>

The organization of the Salvadoran people was an achievement of the poor who could no longer bear to live in a state of humiliation.

His third pastoral letter addressed the Church’s relations with the popular movements. In this connection Romero said: “The Church has a duty to serve the people [...]. Its field of responsibility covers everything which is human in essence and is part of the struggle of the people [...]. In our country these rights are in most cases little more than the right to survive and escape poverty.”<sup>203</sup>

The fourth pastoral letter, which covers various topics, contains the following reflection: “Those who have heard bad news in the secular sphere and experienced even worse realities, [...] now hear, through the Church, the Word of Jesus: ‘The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.’ ‘Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.’ And hence they also have Glad Tidings to bring to the rich: that they should go to the poor to share the good things of life with them.”<sup>204</sup>

Romero instructed the people to assume responsibility and take an active part in rebuilding their country: “The hope which we promulgate among the poor is one of having their dignity restored to them and taking their fate in their own hands.”<sup>205</sup>

The key to understanding and adopting the clearly integrative and active ecclesiology of Romero is the necessity of a new ministry or an accompanying of the small communities, which includes a political dimension.

The Church requires a special ministry, which we call pastoral care or accompaniment and which breaks with the familiar forms

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<sup>202</sup> Ibid.

<sup>203</sup> Romero, O.A., *Cuarta Carta Pastoral, La Iglesia y las Organizaciones Políticas*, 6 August 1978, in: Coto, L. (ed.), o. cit.

<sup>204</sup> Ibid.

<sup>205</sup> Ibid.

of a mass ministry. That is why Romero reproves those who wish to reduce the faith to the personal or family sphere and exclude it from the vocational, economic, social and political spheres, as though sin, love, prayer and forgiveness had nothing to do with them. In fact, the necessity of the Church's presence in politics lies at the heart of the Christian faith: the dominion of Christ over all spheres of life. Christ attests that all human beings are brothers and sisters; each individual is worth as much as any other; all are "one" in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:28; Puebla 515-516).<sup>206</sup>

In Romero's thought the Church and its actions must exhibit the following characteristics:

1. The unity created by evangelical mission and persecution.<sup>207</sup>
2. The striving for holiness in peace.<sup>208</sup>
3. The apostolic zeal for a liberating evangelization.<sup>209</sup>
4. The ecclesiastical solidarity: The Church is community and participation.

What kind of a model of Catholicism does Romero represent?

According to Jon Sobrino SJ, "Mgr. Romero's model of Catholicism is that the universal Church becomes Catholic when all its local churches support one another by deepening their Christian essence and giving a Christian response to historical challenges. This is the Pauline model of 'each carrying the other's burden.' Each individual church gives to all the other churches and receives from the others."<sup>210</sup>

<sup>206</sup> Cf. *Ibid.* no. 94. (Digital version: <http://www.romeroes.com/monsenor-romero-su-pensamiento/cartas-pastorales>, retrieved 26 March 2012).

<sup>207</sup> *Ibid.* no. 87.

<sup>208</sup> Mgr. Oscar A. Romero, Homilía 21 agosto 1977, in: Coto, L. (ed.), o. cit. 190.

<sup>209</sup> *Ibid.* 21.

<sup>210</sup> Sobrino, J., Mons. Romero y la Iglesia salvadoreña, un año después, in: ECA 389 (1981) 144. "I am moved and inspired by what Father Jon Sobrino writes about Mgr. Romero and I fully share his view of the significance of ecclesiastical solidarity. I have taken up some of his theological intuitions. I think that when we speak of ecclesiastical solidarity it is important to mention its ecumenical significance. We only need to look at what is happening in other churches outside of El Salvador to convince ourselves of the effectiveness and significance of this ecclesiastical solidarity, that is to say of what the "Catholicity" of the Church might also imply." Cf. Coto, L., *La Ecclesiología en el pensamiento de Mons. Oscar A. Romero*, o. cit.

On the basis of his testimony Leonardo Boff describes a development of thought and its core, thus contributing to the construction of an ecclesiology which promotes and sustains the small communities. His collection of essays entitled “And the Church Was Made a People: Ecclesiogenesis”<sup>211</sup> offers a retrospective view based on the verse of the Gospel according to St. John (1:14) “The Word became flesh” up to the beginnings of liberation theology and its development, which was the occasion of this work.

“The CEBs want to be and are visible Church based on these four elements: faith, celebration, community and mission. The *valuable faith* is the outstanding feature of the CEBs. And yet this faith has nothing sweet about it, it is no panacea for mediocre minds, no refuge for the timorous, nor is it resignation in the face of the world’s misery. This faith is a principle of response and dedication to the liberation of the whole man [sic!] and of all men, starting with those who are objectively oppressed in our capitalist society. The main reference point for this faith is the Word of God, the practical life of Jesus and trust in the mighty power of the Holy Ghost.”<sup>212</sup>

Boff explains that the *faith* is celebrated and that the celebrations are no empty rites, but calls upon us “to ritualize life before God and the brothers and sisters”. The Church-like nature of the CEBs also implies *community*, only assuming radical change in the style in which it has been lived so far: “The singer must reckon with the bishop and have his worth [and his voice]; the layman in charge of a group with the priest; the farm hand with the monk; and the rich man, who has become converted to the cause of justice, with the poor man, who is loved by God because he is poor, not because he is good.”<sup>213</sup>

The last basic element in ecclesiology that Boff refers to is the *mission*, which means ministering to men and women in the world. The mission is fulfilled by the prophecy that heralds the message

<sup>211</sup> Cf. Boff, L., Y la Iglesia se hizo pueblo, Ecclesiogenesis, La Iglesia que nace de la fe del pueblo, Santander, 1986, especially 112-114. Cf. the German edition: idem, Und die Kirche ist Volk geworden, Ekklesiogenesis, Düsseldorf, 1987.

<sup>212</sup> Boff, L., Y la Iglesia se hizo pueblo, Ecclesiogenesis, La Iglesia que nace de la fe del pueblo, o. cit.

<sup>213</sup> Ibid.

of God while at the same time denouncing everything that offends against life and the Kingdom.

The ministry, Boff explains, includes the ecclesiastical community which “accompanies the individuals and groups in their specific situation, which fosters hope and life and the trusting frankness before God and our fellow men, by creating communities of faith, hope and charity which strive for integral liberation.”<sup>214</sup>

As one of the outstanding “madmen” I would choose Pedro Casaldáliga for his incarnate, pertinent and vital poetry. It may suffice to refer to the book *Espiritualidad de la Liberación*,<sup>215</sup> which he published with José María Vigil. Chapter Three, which deals with new ecclesiology, contains the following passage:

“In the spirituality of liberation the chapter on the Church is a crucial and often controversial one, as it not only agitates individuals, but shakes the foundations of the institution itself. The image, the understanding, the perspective, the access, the love, the spirit [...], with which the spirituality of liberation brings into focus the mystery and the ecclesiastical reality, permits us to speak of a new ‘sense of ecclesiality’ or of a new spirituality in the life of the mystery in the Latin American Church. People here are speaking and writing – quite rightly – of a ‘conversion of the Church’,<sup>216</sup> of a ‘new way of being Church’, even of a ‘new, communal – communal from top to bottom – way of being for the Church as a whole.’”<sup>217</sup>

The testimonials of these and many other, very well-known personalities, whom we do not have space to mention here, open up a window to us through which we can see the small communities or CEBs calling for certain key elements, which of course lie in the ‘grace’ or gift of God, but also in the consciousness and inner strength of

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<sup>214</sup> Ibid.

<sup>215</sup> Casaldáliga, P./ Vigil, J.M., *Espiritualidad de la Liberación*, Santander 1993. The quotation given above has been taken from the digital edition on the website Servicios Koinonia: <http://servicioskoinonia.org/Casaldaliga>, retrieved on 25 March 2012.

<sup>216</sup> Ellacuría, I., *Conversión de la Iglesia al Reino de Dios*, o. cit. 1984.

<sup>217</sup> A characteristic feature of the Basic Ecclesial Communities in Brazil. On the subject of our ecclesiastical peculiarities see Vigil, J.M., *Descubrir la originalidad cristiana de la Iglesia latinoamericana*, in: *Sal Terrae* 79 (1991) 629-640.

human groups, who are taking their fate in their hands and deciding to found a 'community' based on faith, a community that is in itself an agent of change.

The CEB cannot be a 'placeholder' for missionaries whose mentality is as remote from reality as was that of the former conquistadors and colonizers, who wrapped themselves in a false paternalism and only needed the poor to define their own identity. The CEB aims to be a place of mutual edification for everyone, a place of learning and growing. It must be a place of decisive political practice, of activity in which people take part with 'body and voice', people who are no longer victims but are aware of their dignity and, drawing strength from their newly found sense of identity with those who have stood up, stand up here and now to transform society.

"The CEBs bring forth not only the new Christians, who feel themselves to be inhabitants of the heavenly Jerusalem which is in the process of emerging as a city of those inspired by justice and solidarity, but also the citizens who care about the fate of their brothers and sisters and have the courage to devote their blood and lives to such an exalted cause. This fact alone is sufficient to confer upon the Basic Ecclesial Community – which Paul VI called the "hope of the universal Church" – dignity and greatness."<sup>218</sup>

### **Challenges for an ecclesiastical understanding of the Small Communities or CEBs**

It is not an idea of Nietzsche's that is lurking behind the scenes but a simple statement of fact: there are no easy options or convenient decisions with regard to the models presented above. Usually it is the last model which the authors offer us and which we have focused attention on. It is one aimed at an ecclesiology or ecclesiastical model which supports the small communities. Proceeding from Küng's paradigm of enlightened Modernism, in which these small communities arose, and from post-enlightened Post-modernism, the following models may be distinguished:

- the people's Church as a liberating Easter community (Marins/Dulles);

<sup>218</sup> Boff, L., o. cit.

- a Church based on the poor as a new model of liberation theology and practice (Boff);
- the prophetic and ministerial Church (Losada Espinosa);
- the post-Council Church, as exemplified by Medellín and Puebla (Codina and De Almeida);
- the historically liberating model of the Church of the poor and oppressed (Codina).

Even if explanations may seem superfluous, the applied models are not lacking in challenges and resistance from the other models. It appears that the radicalism of the ecclesiological model required by the CEBs gives rise to a certain alarm.

Pablo Richard notes critically how at the Fifth General Assembly of the Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean in Aparecida<sup>219</sup> (Brazil) the clear and unambiguous message concerning the sole option with and for the poor was gradually so diluted that what we were left with was an “overriding option for the poor.” Richard calls for vigilance: “If the Church adopts an overriding option for the poor, it must necessarily decide against neo-liberalism. The whole document of Aparecida contains not a single criticism of neo-liberal ideology. The Church, which denounced Marxist ideology in no uncertain terms, is now silent in the face of neo-liberalism. Why? Because neo-liberalism is the ideology which justifies the present free market economy. The Church refrains from criticizing neo-liberalism because it is the ideology of the Christian elites. The rich sense that today’s Church is closer to them than in previous decades; the poor are doomed to silence.”<sup>220</sup>

He goes on to point out that two models are identified in the document: one that speaks of an “overriding option for the poor” and another that is characterized by an “overriding option for the elites.”<sup>221</sup> “In general,” Richard explains, “the Church seems to incline more to the model of a Church of elites (almost the whole of chapter 10).

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<sup>219</sup> The Fifth General Assembly of the Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean was held from 13 to 31 May 2007 in Aparecida (Brazil).

<sup>220</sup> Richard, P., *Iglesia sobre roca*, in: <http://sicsal.net/reflexiones/PabloRichardIglesiasobre-roca.html>, retrieved on 25 March 2012.

<sup>221</sup> *Ibid.*

The 'elites' are all those who stand at the head of society, whence they exercise the power to determine the economic, social and political life of a country: journalists, media moguls and publicists, businessmen, politicians and others. The option for the elites is presented as a 'modernization' of the Church. 'The elites' do not necessarily identify themselves with 'the rich', but they do have a 'top down' power which identifies them with the prevailing groups. The option in favour of the elites makes the poor feel slowly abandoned by the Catholic Church."<sup>222</sup>

Pablo Richard points out that the Aparecida document does mention the Basic Ecclesiastical Communities, but what follows puts us on the alert: such communities are defined as "the strongest foundation for a Church that opts for the poor". If that is the case, the elite as a model from which an ecclesiology can be derived that supports the Basic Ecclesial Communities has no role to play. This turns out to be an internal contradiction, since only an ecclesiology that defined itself as being 'by the poor and for the poor' would be able to support the Basic Ecclesial Communities. Let us remember that the elite to which Richard refers is the group wielding the power that makes it feel entitled to uphold the institutional structures. Its instinct is rather to destroy or at least weaken the small communities, as it realizes that the united people possess a liberating power of transformation. If the people are strengthened by the Word of God and the example of Jesus of Nazareth it will, like the prophets of yore, expose the patterns of oppression of the prevailing power-holders. In this sense it is inevitable that the small communities also define themselves as entities of a political force.

Just one text, according to Richard, speaks clearly of the CEBs or small communities, even if the above-mentioned document refers to them indirectly on occasion. In sections 178, 179 and 180 Aparecida describes their place in the structure and highlights their function as "the germ of an ecclesiastical structuring and centring of the faith and its evangelization"<sup>223</sup> in the sense of Medellín. For its part, Puebla

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<sup>222</sup> Ibid.

<sup>223</sup> Cf. CELAM, *Die Kirche in der gegenwärtigen Umwandlung Lateinamerikas im Lichte des Konzils. Sämtliche Beschlüsse der II. Generalversammlung des Lateinamerikanischen Episkopates Medellín 24.8.-6.9.1968*, in: Sekretariat der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz

affirmed that the small communities, especially the Basic Ecclesial Communities, granted the people access to a better understanding of the Word of God, to social commitment in the name of the gospel, to the setting up of new services to be performed by the laity, and to a deepening of faith among adults.<sup>224</sup>

In Section 179 Aparecida repeats more than once the unity with the pastoral offices and their subordination to the latter so as to safeguard the ecclesiastical community. The communities, the Aparecida document notes, develop their evangelizing and missionary work among the ordinary people and those who live on the fringes of society. They are a visible expression of the overriding option for the poor. They are the source and seed of a wide range of services and ministries which enrich the life of society and the Church. The document goes on to reaffirm the localization of the communities in the visible structure of the Church, thus assuring their ecclesiastical character.

But if one reads the document in the context of social reality and the above-mentioned models, one senses a certain domestication. And in the “modernization”, which Richard addresses and to which chapter 10 of the document urges us, there is an unmistakable suggestion of allegiance to the interests of the capitalist world.

The re-establishment of the ecclesiastical foundation, the ‘ecclesio-genesis’ inspired by the Early Christian communities and the Second Vatican Council, is largely based on what the General Assembly of the Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean in Medellín laid down concerning the Joint Pastoral Letter in sections 10 and 15 of the closing document. Paul VI approved this text and included it in his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii nuntiandi*.

If we see ecclesiology as expressing the efforts of the Church to understand itself by getting closer to its own mystery in historical

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(ed.), Die Kirche Lateinamerikas. Dokumente der II. und III. Generalversammlung des Lateinamerikanischen Episkopates in Medellín und Puebla (6.9.1968 / 13.2.1979), Stimmen der Weltkirche, no. 8, Bonn, 1979, 121-128, no. 15.

<sup>224</sup> Cf. CELAM, Die Evangelisierung Lateinamerikas in Gegenwart und Zukunft, Dokument der III. Generalkonferenz des Lateinamerikanischen Episkopates Puebla 26.1-13.2.1979, in: Sekretariat der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz (ed.), o. cit., 258, no. 629.

terms, then it, ecclesiology, thus understood, is by definition a plural dynamic, which is cultural to the extent that it blends in with the culture of other nations, and political to the extent that it stands in the service of the intellectual progress of the ecclesiastical community itself and reshapes everything.

According to Puebla this ecclesiastical inculturation was promoted not only by the doctrine of the Council, but also by the experience of the Latin American peoples in these “years [...] of anxious searching for their own identity, characterized by an awakening of the popular masses and by attempts to achieve American integration [...]. This made it easier for the Catholic populace to accept the setting up of a Church that also presented itself as a ‘nation’. The Church is also, however, a universal nation that penetrates other nations in order to help them to fraternize and blend into one big community, as Latin America was beginning to imagine it”<sup>225</sup>

This definition depends on a crucial incarnation [...] of specific individuals who are present, have a voice and are equipped with a perfect right to participate in order to bring about a change of course or, as Juan Carlos Scannone said with regard to the theology of the People of God: “It is as if, proceeding from an inculturated re-reading of ‘Whitsun: one spirit and many tongues’, one were to re-interpret the expression ‘Laós ex ethôn’ and arrive at a ‘new, global, ecclesiological formula’ [...]. This would facilitate – in keeping with the experience of the Latin American and Argentinian churches and in the spirit of folk theology – the ecclesiological relevance of cultures in the ‘marvellous *mutual exchange*’ [Scannone speaks of discovering a ‘maravilloso *intercambio*’] of inculturation. In this way we understand the catholicity of the People of God as an ‘*incarnation* of the People of God among the nations.”<sup>226</sup>

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<sup>225</sup> Ibid. 187-188, no. 233.

<sup>226</sup> Scannone, J.C., *Perspectivas Eclesiológicas de la teología del Pueblo de Dios*, in: [http://www.mercaba.org/fichas/teologia\\_latina/perspectivas\\_ecclesiológicas.htm](http://www.mercaba.org/fichas/teologia_latina/perspectivas_ecclesiológicas.htm), retrieved on 27 March 2012. It is here that the author explains his understanding of the theology of the People of God: “There occurs an inter-relation based on the theological priority of the People of God, if one counts the People of God as being ‘in’ the nations: the incarnation (in general) of the People of God, its incarnation ‘in’ the nations, just as one sees the People of God as a historical subject ‘among’ the nations and the unity ‘between’ the People of God and the world of the nations.”

In this connection we should not fail to mention what Daniel García Delgado has called “grass-roots neo-communitarianism”. Carlos Galli quotes the relevant passage: “In this phenomenon faith can discover the creative and healing actions of God, especially among the poor and the positive response of man [sic!]. For, faced by an individualist struggle to compete, unemployment and the contrast between those who live in society [*incluidos*] and those who are excluded [*excluidos*], vibrant, networked communities are springing up at all levels (religious, cultural, social and economic), producing a new *cultural synthesis and new ways of perceiving the world*, new forms of *folk spirituality*, of *intelligent readings* of the Word, of personal and communal *prayer*, of communal exercise of *Christian works of charity* and of participatory *institutionalization*. All this is in harmony with Latin American Christian folk wisdom as well as with the new (modern and postmodern) cultural sensibility. One can transfer to this neo-communitarianism what Walter Kasper says: ‘Whenever something new crops up, whenever life and reality awaken and tend to excel themselves to an ecstatic extent [...], something is revealed of the workings and reality of the spirit of God. The Second Vatican Council recognized these universal workings of the Holy Ghost [...] in culture and human progress’<sup>227,228</sup>

This newly emerging force is doubtless a response to the meaning of the Body of the Church, as explained by the Second Vatican Council and in which a degree of subjectivism has been granted to the individual local churches.<sup>229</sup> Medellín and Puebla and, if it comes to that, Aparecida too, help to explain this meaning by giving the small basic communities historical and sociological substance as a church which is building itself from the ground up, from the people, in the people and by the people, in a bottom-up process.

Thus it comes to pass that our “madmen and madwomen” have left the pantheon in order to imbue the notion of Church with new meaning by making it a Church for the people. Their promulgation of

<sup>227</sup> Kasper, W. *Der Gott Jesu Christi*, Mainz, 1982, 279-280; quoted after Scannone, J.C., o. cit. note 62.

<sup>228</sup> Galli, C., *El Pueblo de Dios en los pueblos del mundo*, *Catolicidad, encarnación e intercambio en la eclesiología actual*, unpublished dissertation, Buenos Aires, 1994.

<sup>229</sup> LG 23.

the glad tidings makes it clear to all that if God may have been dead at some moment in the past... He has arisen and is now alive and well again.



# Ecclesial Dimension of Small Christian Communities

Michael Amaladoss

Small Christian Communities (SCCs) or Basic Ecclesial Communities (BCCs) are a post-Vatican II phenomenon. They have been called a new way of being Church.<sup>230</sup> The term 'basic' refers to the bottom or base of a hierarchical society from which such communities arise. This could give it a certain ideological slant, as we shall see. So I shall speak of Small Christian Communities (SCCs), though both phrases refer to the same reality. Looking around the world we can see three kinds of SCCs. In certain areas like Africa or India they represent a geographical and pastoral division of a parish for the purpose of better catechetical, liturgical and missionary animation. The people may be economically poor or better off depending on the area where they live. In Latin America and Philippines they may represent groups of the poor (from the base) that have, in addition, a liberational thrust.<sup>231</sup> We also have groups of people who come together for a more intense spiritual life like new ecclesial movements like *Focolarini*, *Communione e liberazione*, and the *Neo Catechumenate*. They tend to be middle or upper middle class people. Some of the 'basic communities' in Latin America have been criticized for being anti-hierarchical in the 1970s.<sup>232</sup> I do not think that it is so now. Some bishops have been critical of the independent behavior of the new ecclesial movements with reference to parish structures. But there seems to be a *modus vivendi* now. However I am not taking such matters into consideration here. I am just looking at them as SCCs and exploring their ecclesiological significance. At the moment I am

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<sup>230</sup> See: Ponnumathan, S., *The Spirituality of Basic Ecclesial Communities in the Socio-Religious Context of Trivandrum/Kerala, India*, Rome 1996, 13 and *passim*.

<sup>231</sup> Barreiro, A., *Basic Ecclesial Communities, The Evangelization of the Poor*, New York 1984.

<sup>232</sup> EN 58.

also taking for granted that they have to relate to a priest, either from a parish or belonging to a religious congregation, to preside over their Eucharistic celebrations. I shall explore the implications of this later.

Before the Second Vatican Council the Church was primarily identified with the clergy: the Pope, the bishops and the priests. It was an institutional and hierarchical view of the Church. The people were the beneficiaries of the institution. The Pope had universal jurisdiction. He appointed all the Bishops. The priests worked under the Bishops. The people benefited from their catechetical and sacramental services. The 'lay' people had organizations like the Catholic Action to get involved in the evangelization of the secular world. But they too were under the control of the clergy. The Church was a clerical institution.

### **Ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council: The Church as the People of God**

The Second Vatican Council brought in, among others, three kinds of change in perspectives that are significant for the life of the Church and of the SCCs. The first was the vision of the Church as primarily the priestly *People of God*. The bishops and presbyters were ministers at the service of the people, even if this service included a dimension of leadership in teaching the faith and in sacramental celebrations. Jesus establishes a community of the new covenant as "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation... who in times past were not a people, but now are the People of God." (1 Pet. 2:9-10)<sup>233</sup> In the liturgy "full public worship is performed by the Mystical Body of Jesus Christ, that is by the Head and his members."<sup>234</sup> Therefore Christ is their head. They have the dignity and freedom of the 'sons of God', "in whose heart the Holy Spirit dwells as in a temple. Its law is the new commandment to love as Christ loved us. (cf. Jn 13:34) Its destiny is the kingdom of God."<sup>235</sup> "The faithful indeed, by virtue of their royal priesthood, participate in the offering of the Eucharist." They exercise it "by the reception of the sacraments, prayer and thanksgiving, the

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<sup>233</sup> LG 9.

<sup>234</sup> SC 7.

<sup>235</sup> LG 9.

witness of a holy life, abnegation and active charity.”<sup>236</sup> “The whole body of the faithful... cannot err in matters of belief..., when “from the bishops to the last faithful” they manifest a universal consensus in matters of faith and morals.”<sup>237</sup> This “sense of the faithful” balances the role of the “teaching office” or *Magisterium*. It is this dignity as the People of God that gives a certain status to the SCCs. Bishops, priests and the religious may have had a role in launching the SCCs. They have their responsibility as ministers – servants. But over the years the people become aware of their dignity, significance and role in the Church.

### **The Church as a Communion of Local Churches**

The second development is the theology of the *local Churches*. The bishops are seen as a college with the Pope as their unifying centre. The bishops in their turn are the unifying centres of the local churches called by the Council ‘particular Churches.’<sup>238</sup>

This Church of Christ is really present in all legitimately organized local groups of the faithful, which, in so far as they are united to their pastors, are also quite appropriately called Churches in the New Testament.<sup>239</sup> For these are in fact, in their own localities, the new people called by God, in the power of the Holy Spirit... In them the faithful are gathered together through the preaching of the Gospel of Christ, and the mystery of the Lord’s super is celebrated... In these communities, though they may often be small and poor, or existing in the diaspora, Christ is present through whose power and influence the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church is constituted.<sup>240</sup>

This is a crucial affirmation which will help us identify the ecclesial character of the SCCs. It is true that this is said about a particular Church around a bishop. But a particular church is itself made up of many communities gathered around the presbyters. The SCCs are normally associated with presbyters who preside over their

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<sup>236</sup> LG 10.

<sup>237</sup> LG 12.

<sup>238</sup> CD 11.

<sup>239</sup> Cf. Acts 8:1; 14:22-23; 20:17 and passim.

<sup>240</sup> LG 26.

Eucharistic celebration. So this can be applied analogously to them too.

The third significant affirmation is the vision of the *Church as a communion*. This has many facets. The *Document on the Church* starts with the statement that “the Church, in Christ, is in the nature of sacrament – a sign and instrument, that is, of communion with God and of unity among all men.”<sup>241</sup> The thrust towards communion is attributed to God’s will. The *Decree on Missionary Activity* asserts: “It pleased God to call men to share in his life and not merely singly, without any bond between them, but he formed them into a people, in which his children who had been scattered were gathered together. (cf. Jn 11:52)”<sup>242</sup> This communion is assured by the Holy Spirit and does not exclude diversity. “All the faithful scattered throughout the world are in communion with each other in the Holy Spirit... Holding a rightful place in the communion of the Church there are also particular Churches that retain their own traditions.”<sup>243</sup> So we have an image the Church as a communion of local Churches. This image adds itself to other non-institutional images of the Church evoked earlier in the same document: sheepfold, cultivated field, building of God, and Body and Bride of Christ. Analogously the Church can be seen as a communion of SCCs.

### **The Church and the Churches in the New Testament**

The SCCs which arose in the 1970s, especially in Latin America, Africa and Asia, may not have been aware of these ecclesial dimensions, because the Council did not speak of the SCCs. The SCCs were started to increase the Christian awareness, the life and the missionary witness of the people. But once they began searching for their ecclesial status they could go back to these texts to understand, affirm and even defend their identity as Churches. Their efforts also got the support of the experience of early Church, especially as reported by St. Paul. When we go to the New Testament the experience of the first Christian community strikes us as a model of an SCC. The first Christians

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<sup>241</sup> LG 1.

<sup>242</sup> AG 2.

<sup>243</sup> LG 13.

devoted themselves to the apostle's teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of the bread and the prayers... All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and foods and distribute the proceedings to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spend much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the good will of all the people. (Acts 2:42, 44-47a)

We can agree that this is an ideal image of an SCC. It is also an experiential one.

St. Paul in his letters uses the word 'Church' in the singular (cf. Rom 16:23; 1 Cor 14:23) and in the plural (cf. 2 Cor 11:8; 12:13; Phil 4:14). He concludes his first letter to the Corinthians: "The churches of Asia send greetings. Aquila and Prisca, together with the church in their house, greet you warmly in the Lord." (1 Cor 16:19) The Church may be the liturgical assembly (1 Cor 11:18; 14:19, 28, 34-35), or a local community (1 Cor 1:2; 16,1) or the whole universal community of believers. (1 Cor 15:9; Gal 1:13; Phil 3:6)<sup>244</sup> So we can say that we have scriptural warrant to call SCCs churches.

### **Theologically Speaking**

Theologically speaking, every community that comes together to listen to and reflect over the Word of God and to share bread and wine in memory of Christ's paschal mystery becomes the body of Christ, animated by the Spirit and witnessing to and working for the Kingdom of God that Jesus proclaimed and realized. The Word and the Eucharist, Christ and the Spirit, witness and mission to the Kingdom become the characteristics of the Church. It is not a section of a larger Church. It is the full realization of the mystery of the Church in a particular place and time. The (universal) Church is not a totality of parts. It is the multiple realization of the one Church, fully present in each place and united in communion with each other in Christ and in the Spirit. The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in a document showing how the Church can be seen as a communion says:

<sup>244</sup> Cf. Ponnuthan, o. cit. 19.

The particular Churches, insofar as they are “*part of the one Church of Christ*”, have a special relationship of “*mutual interiority*” with the whole, that is, with the universal Church, because in every particular Church “*the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church of Christ is truly present and active*”. For this reason, “*the universal Church cannot be conceived as the sum of the particular Churches, or as a federation of particular Churches*”... In fact, the community, in receiving the eucharistic presence of the Lord, receives the entire gift of salvation and shows, even in its lasting visible particular form, that it is the image and true presence of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church.<sup>245</sup>

Blessed John Paul II spells out the ecclesial role of the SCCs in his Encyclical *The Mission of the Redeemer*, 51:

These are groups of Christians who, at the level of the family or in a similarly restricted setting, come together for prayer, Scripture reading, catechesis, and discussion on human and ecclesial problems with a view to a common commitment. These communities are a sign of vitality within the Church, an instrument of formation and evangelization, and a solid starting point for a new society based on a ‘civilization of love’.

### The Experiential Dimension

The sociologists distinguish between ‘society’ and ‘community’. A society is an organization. A community is an experiential fellowship. The SCCs provide the Christians an experience of community. As Blessed John Paul II says: “Within them, the individual Christian experiences community and therefore senses that he or she is playing an active role and is encouraged to share in the common task.”<sup>246</sup> This experiential, pastoral and practical dimension has been stressed by bishops from different parts of the world. The Bishops of Latin America (CELAM) in their conference at Medellin (1968) said:

The Christian base community is the first and fundamental ecclesial nucleus, which on its own level must make itself

<sup>245</sup> Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith, Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Some Aspects of the Church Understood as Communion, May 1992, Nos. 9 and 11.

<sup>246</sup> RM 51.

responsible for the richness and expansion of the faith, as well as the cult which is its expression. This community becomes then the initial cell of the ecclesiastical structures and the focus of evangelization.<sup>247</sup>

The East African bishops stress the importance of becoming local churches that can be self-ministering, self-propagating and self-supporting – somewhat like the three-self church of China. They also point to the experiential dimension of the SCCs. “Church life must be based on the communities in which everyday life takes place; those basic and manageable social groupings whose members can experience real inter-personal relationship and feel a sense of communal belonging both in living and working.”<sup>248</sup> Bishop J.X. Labayen of the Philippines speaks of his efforts to promote the growth of the SCCs in his diocese and says: “I have seen faith of our people deepen, commitment to one another, narrow minds and hearts open up, prayer intensify community life form.”<sup>249</sup>

### **SCCs, the Eucharist and the Minister**

Speaking of the Church as the People of God, the Second Vatican Council’s *Document on the Church* says: “Taking part in the Eucharistic sacrifice, the source and summit of the Christian life, they offer the divine victim to God and themselves along with it.”<sup>250</sup> It is in the Eucharistic celebration that the Church becomes and experiences itself fully as Church. This means that the SCCs must be in touch with a priest who can preside over the Eucharist. But given the shortage of priests everywhere the SCCs and even many parishes today have to be satisfied with Sunday celebrations without a priest. This is obviously a problem. The Church is primarily the People of God, at whose service there are appropriate ministers. Ideally speaking the Church must be able to have the necessary ministers rather than adapting itself to the available ministers. In the early Church the person who was the head of a community seems to have presided over the Eucharist. This must have been true of the house Churches of St. Paul. (cf. 1 Cor 16:19)

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<sup>247</sup> Quoted in Ponnunmuthan, o. cit. 28.

<sup>248</sup> Ibid. 31.

<sup>249</sup> Ibid. 33-34.

<sup>250</sup> LG 11.

There were different ministerial charisms in the Church: apostles, prophets, healers, miracle workers, etc. (cf. 1 Cor 12:4-11) But as the structures of the Church developed, all these different charisms were rolled up into one and attributed to the presbyters. Later the charism of the monk was also added and celibacy also was demanded from them. It may be time to rethink this ministerial structure in the Church. The college of Bishops with the Pope at its centre will be there. Of course it could become really collegial and promote diversity and communion rather than remain a hierarchical and centralizing monolith. At the local level, from the SCCs to the diocese, the community could choose their leaders, who could be recognized and ordained by the leaders of the neighboring communities in the name of the Church, as was and is the practice. This would be the manifestation of the Church as a communion of Churches. The leaders of the SCCs and of the parishes could be *virī probati*, mature people, who could also be married persons. In this way the SCCs can really be a new way of being Church. Due to the shortage of priests everywhere the (lay) people are taking increasing responsibility for various ministries in the local Churches. At this time a new structuring of the ministerial roles in the Church may be necessary and useful. The people then will get involved in the renewal of the life and mission of the Church with greater enthusiasm and commitment. The Church communities themselves will become relevant and dynamic.<sup>251</sup>

### **The Global and the Local**

Today there is much talk about globalization. The rapidity, extent and diversity of the media of communications have made the world a global village. But this has led to the dominance of a consumer culture and a growing polarization of the world between the rich and the poor. People are losing their cultural identities and getting alienated. In such a situation SCCs can offer a new sense of rootedness and community. Unfortunately the Church may be one institution that remains strongly global and centralized. It may be time that the Church promotes localization and inculturation that were a promise

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<sup>251</sup> Leonardo Boff has discussed this issue elaborately. See his *Ecclesio-genesis, The Base Communities Reinvent the Church*, New York 1986, 61-75. As a background see: Schille-beeckx, E. / Metz, J.B. (ed.), *The Right of a Community to a Priest*, Concilium, vol. 135, New York 1980.

of the Second Vatican Council. Encouraging SCCs could be one way of achieving such pluralism-in-unity in the Church. It is said that we must think globally, but act locally. SCCs offer a base for such local activity.

### **Small Human Communities**

Asian theologians suggest that in the multi-religious context of Asia we must think also of Small Human Communities (SHCs) which would include people of all religions and ideologies living in a particular area.<sup>252</sup> The goal of the mission of the Church is no longer Church extension, but the building of the Kingdom of God and of the Church as its symbol and servant. In this journey towards the Kingdom the other religions are seen as co-pilgrims and collaborators. The Church recognizes today that the Spirit of God is present and active in all cultures and religions.<sup>253</sup> The Spirit is moving all peoples towards communion with God and each other. The real enemies of this process are Satan (the power of evil) and Mammon (the power of money), not the other religions. All religions are against egoism and inordinate desire and wish to promote love and compassion that will bring people together. It is possible for people of different religions to collaborate in the promotion of common human and spiritual values, though they may find justification for it in their own religious traditions. Through dialogue they can arrive at a consensus that will enable them to act together in society.

The intention is not to drown out or marginalize the SCCs in the SHCs. On the contrary the SCCs could be the nuclei around which the SHCs could coalesce. The SCCs will still feel inspired by their common reading of the Bible and the celebration of the Eucharist. But when they think about the community around them and what they could do to promote in it the Gospel values of freedom, fellowship and justice they will seek to build wider coalitions and collaborate with the believers in other religions and all people of good will. These

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<sup>252</sup> For a reference to the Asian Bishops see Rosales, G. / Arevalo, C.G. (ed.), *For All the Peoples of Asia*. Manila 1997, 254. See also: Sekhar, V., *Strong Neighbourhood Communities, Religion and Politics in Secular India*, Bangalore 2008. Sekhar calls SHCs 'Neighbourhood Communities'.

<sup>253</sup> RM 28.

SHCs will have their own structures and leadership. But the SCCs, well organized and motivated as they are, could be the motive force behind them. They would not seek to dominate, but be humble as Jesus was (cf. Phil 2:6-11) and work as leaven transforming the world from within. (cf. Mt 13:33)

Such collaboration in promoting common human and spiritual values may lead them to encounter each other at deeper spiritual levels. As a matter of fact the Second Vatican Council did launch a movement towards an ongoing inter-religious dialogue, which a developing positive appreciation of other religions as facilitators of salvific divine-human encounter has further encouraged. Such a dialogue can lead, beyond collaboration at the civic-secular level, to a common reading of the various scriptures and even to praying together.<sup>254</sup> Such prayer, bringing them together before God/Absolute, can unite them in communion with God/Absolute and with each other. Side by side with ecclesial communion we will have emerging a cosmic communion. Thus will find fulfillment God's mystery which is "to gather all things in him (Christ), things in heaven and things on earth". (Eph 1:10) The SCCs are playing an important evangelizing role here.

## Conclusion

Foreseeing the future of the Church in an era of increasing secularization Karl Rahner said that the Church will become a 'little flock'. I think that we are called to envisage the Church, not as a grandiose reality, but as a network of SCCs, working from within as leaven and transforming the world. The Church of the future will be one of the people, not of the clergy, though the clergy will always be there at the service of the people as facilitators and coordinators. It will indeed be a new way of being the Church.

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<sup>254</sup> Cf. Puthanangady, P. (ed), *Sharing Worshi* Bangalore, National Biblical, Catechetical and Liturgical Centre, 1988; Ryan, T., *Interreligious Prayer, A Christian Guide*, New York 2008; Béthune, P.F. de, *Une prière interreligieuse?* Monastère de Clerlande, 2011.

## A New Way of being Church – Ecclesiological reflections on Small Christian Communities

Klaus Krämer

Small Christian Communities are now once again under discussion. The main reason for this renewed interest has to do with the present pastoral situation in Germany. Because of the expansion of pastoral areas and the merging of congregations many people feel increasingly out of touch with the Church in their everyday lives. The question of how the Church can maintain a vibrant presence close to where people live is, therefore, one of increasing urgency.

The building of Small Christian Communities is a road down which other parts of the universal Church have already travelled. Could this model be a source of help and inspiration for the pastoral challenges we face? To begin with, there are a number of justifiable misgivings. Can something that works in Africa and Asia really function in a European context? Is there not a fundamental difference in the social conditions here and there? Is it not the case that the pastoral situation of the Church in Germany rests on different premises? On the one hand, there are established community structures with their own social forms, with groups and circles, Catholic associations and organisations. On the other, there is a pronounced need for individual ways of experiencing spirituality.

It is also becoming increasingly clear that things are not going to stay the way they once were. A historically significant period of the Church, during which it engaged in commendable social activities, appears to be coming to an end or to be heading for major change at least. Quite a few people link this development with the initially unsettling, but ultimately fascinating question of what new shape the Church will take in the future. In such circumstances it is worthwhile taking a look at successful models and good examples to see what potential they have to offer. To what extent do they manage to highlight

aspects of the 'complex reality of the Church' to which we have hitherto paid insufficient attention and which could prove productive for that very reason?<sup>255</sup>

### **Approaches to a new way of being Church**

The first question that needs to be asked is what Small Christian Communities really are. What are their characteristic features? What constitutes their 'theological essence', so to speak? To find out I shall first take a look at how they came about.<sup>256</sup>

### **The biblical pastoral approach of the Lumko Institute (South Africa)**

The new pastoral approach has its origins in South Africa in the 1970s when the apartheid regime was in power. Fritz Lobinger und Oswald Hirmer drew on East African experiences of Bible-sharing methods in small communities and used these to develop the concept of Small Christian Communities.

They regarded this new concept as a response to their analysis of the pastoral situation they faced. This analysis had shown that the large number of foreign priests was an important factor in the growing gap that had emerged between the clergy and the laity and had exacerbated the problems posed by inculturation.<sup>257</sup> The number of sects and free churches was climbing steadily. The attraction of these new communities was attributed first and foremost to the fact that they were organised in small, easy-to-handle groups. Hirmer and Lobinger realised that "the survival of the Church in these social circumstances will depend on how successful it is in participating in people's lives, particularly the lives of poor people, and in letting them participate in the life of the Church."<sup>258</sup>

<sup>255</sup> Cf. Krämer, K., *Gemeinsam ein Feuer entfachen, Ein weltkirchlicher Impuls für eine Gemeinde der Zukunft*, in: Dettling, W./ Grillmeyer, S. (ed.), *Das Feuer entfachen, Die Botschaft des Evangeliums in einer globalen Welt, Festschrift für Erzbischof Ludwig Schick*, Würzburg 2009, 146-152.

<sup>256</sup> On the genesis and fundamental methodical approach see especially: Vellguth, K., *Eine neue Art, Kirche zu sein, Entstehung und Verbreitung der Small Christian Communities und des Bibel-Teilens in Afrika und Asien*, Freiburg i. Br. 2005; Spielberg, B., *Kann Kirche noch Gemeinde sein? Praxis, Probleme und Perspektiven der Kirche vor Ort*, Würzburg 2008.

<sup>257</sup> On the social situation in South Africa see: Vellguth, K., o. cit. 45-58.

<sup>258</sup> Spielberg, o. cit. 283.

However, it was not enough merely to increase the number of parishes and deploy more catechists. The aim was to ensure that the common responsibility of all baptised people formulated by the Council could find concrete expression in the everyday activities of the Church in South Africa. People at the local level needed to be given the capacity to form communities that would be self-ministering, self-propagating and self-reliant. From the very beginning, therefore, the Training for Community Ministries courses developed for that purpose were not concerned primarily with making the individual ministries more professional but with changing Church practice. Small Christian Communities are the social manifestation of this change in Church practice.

Crucial importance attaches here to the Seven Steps method of Bible-sharing. Drawing on East African sources, this method was devised by Oswald Hirmer who, as the National Director of what is now the Catholic Biblical Federation at the Lumko Institute, was responsible for the biblical apostolate. The impressive thing about this method is its structural simplicity, although it has elements of complexity, too. The participants first pray together and then share in reading from the Holy Scripture. There follows a period of complete silence in which the passage that has been read can impact on the participants, move them to the very core of their being and enable them to relate to God. The participants subsequently talk to each other about what has moved them and the consequences this may have for the life of the community. Finally, they all pray together again.<sup>259</sup>

What is immediately striking is the simplicity of this method. All the participants can contribute irrespective of their social status and educational qualifications. The moments of silence and exchange, in particular, create a “spiritual atmosphere in which the power that resides in the Word of the Scripture can be sensed by all”.<sup>260</sup> The Seven

<sup>259</sup> The Seven Steps method as developed at the Lumko Institute: (1) Prayer as introduction; (2) Reading of the Bible text; (3) Picking out words and mediating on them (ruminatio); (4) Silence; (5) Exchange about experience with the Bible text; (6) Reflection on what task results from the Bible text; (7) Prayer. See: Vellguth, o. cit. 127

<sup>260</sup> Hirmer, O., *Bibel-Teilen entdecken, Werkbuch zum Bibel-Teilen, Die Idee für eine neue Weise, Kirche zu sein*, in: Hirmer, O./ Steins, G. (ed.), *Gemeinschaft im Wort*, Munich

Steps are strictly Christocentric in character – they build up to an experience of the almost sacramental presence of Christ in the Word. In contrast to traditional methods of spiritual reading and interpretation of Scripture, which tend to focus on the individual as observer, the Seven Steps method produces a shared experience of the Word of God. The individual can contribute what he or she has experienced in a manner that is not too demanding. Particular significance attaches to the sixth step, the social component of Bible-sharing. As time passed, it became increasingly clear that this step was of the utmost importance for the productivity and sustainability of the process. Gradually, inspirational ideas from Latin America were incorporated, which led to more advanced variations of the Seven Steps method. These subjected the social conditions in the community concerned to close scrutiny (Amos Programme).<sup>261</sup>

In Germany, this method of sharing the Bible was regarded largely as a new kind of Bible discussion. The Small Christian Communities context was completely ignored, however. This was made very clear by the lack of any response to the sixth step concerning reflection on the tasks arising.

### **The Asian Integral Pastoral Approach (AsIPA)**

A further important stage in the development of the Small Christian Communities concept began following the Fifth Plenary Assembly of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences in Bandung in 1990. In view of the new challenges facing the Church in Asia it was agreed that a process of renewal should be launched that would be in keeping with the Church's missionary task.<sup>262</sup>

Consideration clearly needed to be taken of the specific Asian context, which was very different from that in Europe and in Africa, too, of course. Asia is a continent with an abundance of religions and one in which religious experience is crucial to the forging of community identity. On average, Christians make up around one per

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1999, 9-17, 9.

<sup>261</sup> See: Vellguth, o. cit. 132-135.

<sup>262</sup> Spielberg, o. cit. 319f; on the Fifth Plenary Assembly of the FABC see: Klaus Vellguth, o. cit. 197-203.

cent of the population in the Asian countries, which puts them in the position of a minority. People in Asia have clearly not been able to warm to Christianity. Felix Wilfred attributes this not just to the fact that it represents an 'alien' import from the West, but also "because the churches in the Asian countries have largely remained aloof from the everyday lives of the population, from their history, struggles and dreams. The Christians have failed to identify with the people, although they have admittedly provided many social services for the population"<sup>263</sup>

The challenge at present is thus to take the practical steps needed to establish a connection between the Church and the people of Asia. Hence the mission of the Church is seen as being to engage in dialogue with the poor of Asia, with local cultures and other religious traditions. Mission means being close to people, responding to their needs with a fine sense of the presence of God in the other cultures and religions, and bearing witness to the values of the Kingdom of God through solidarity and sharing the Word of God. If the People of God are to go about their missionary work in the local church it is important to form a participatory Church community in which people can discover for themselves that they belong to one another and to the Church. In the view of the Fifth Plenary Assembly of the FABC, Small Christian Communities have a major role to play in the development of "a new way of being Church". The specifically Asian character is underlined by the use of the term Asian Integral Pastoral Approach (AsIPA).<sup>264</sup>

The AsIPA process launched by the Asian Bishops' Conferences has influenced the discussion on pastoral theology in Germany. It has inspired a more detailed examination of the Small Christian Communities approach and ensured that the question of whether and how the experience gained in Africa and Asia can be adapted to the pastoral situation in Germany has been put firmly on the agenda. Pastoral care officers in the German dioceses have gone

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<sup>263</sup> Wilfred, F., Die Vereinigung Asiatischer Bischofskonferenzen (FABC), Zielvorstellungen, Herausforderungen und Erfolge, in: Bertsch, L. (ed.), Was der Geist den Gemeinden sagt, Bausteine einer Ekklesiologie der Ortskirchen, Freiburg 1991, 148-167, here 150; quoted after Spielberg, o. cit. 308.

<sup>264</sup> On the origin of the term AsIPA see: Vellguth, o. cit. 206-211.

on several exposure trips to India, Korea and the Philippines. The issue has been debated at various symposia and congresses. Small Christian Community pilot schemes organised in German dioceses have furnished initial experience. Another major step forwards was the fact-finding mission to Korea in 2009 undertaken by the German Bishops' Conference to learn more about the AsIPA approach and its results by talking to representatives of the FABC. While the outcome is still open, the process as such is remarkable in theological terms. What has emerged over the past forty years is nothing less than a practical example of a dialogue on the pastoral experience gained in pursuing new ways of being a missionary Church.

### **Essential elements of Small Christian Communities**

Fritz Lobinger defines Small Christian Communities as communities of Christians who “almost always have good-neighbourly relations; they have weekly meetings in one of their homes, read the Bible together [...] and provide neighbourly help, take on pastoral tasks in the community, send delegates to attend parish council meetings and have close ties with the parish.”<sup>265</sup> Despite all the differences in the specific form taken by Small Christian Communities, which are the product of their respective circumstances and, as such, constitute one of the great strengths of this approach, there are nonetheless a number of common structural features, which I shall now summarise in four points.<sup>266</sup>

A Small Christian Community is open to everybody in the immediate neighbourhood: the Small Christian Communities are organised on a territorial basis. People living nearby are invited to come along. These are not communities of choice but communities of the called located at the place where those who are called live.

A Small Christian Community draws its sustenance from the Word of God and from prayer: Bible-sharing opens the way to a spirituality of the Word of God. Bible-sharing is not regarded primarily

<sup>265</sup> Lobinger, F., *Small Christian Communities*, in: *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche*, Volume 6, Freiburg i. Br. 1997, 124.

<sup>266</sup> See: Tewes, D., *Miteinander Kirche sein vor Ort, Milieuintegration durch Small Christian Communities?*, in: Ebertz, M.N. / Hunstig, H.-G., *Hinaus ins Weite, Gehversuche einer milieusensiblen Kirche*, Würzburg 2008, 224-231, here 228f.

as a method of Bible study but as a way of experiencing the presence of Christ in the Word. Bible-sharing is thus a form of liturgy and at the same time a school of prayer.

A Small Christian Community has an impact on its surroundings as a result of the missionary work it performs: during Bible-sharing the community is called upon to address the question of what mission God has for it in the locality and what tasks he has in store. Helping to carry out Jesus' mission in the immediate surroundings is one of the key features of a Small Christian Community.

A Small Christian Community is connected with the Church as a whole: it is Church on a small scale and it participates in the mission of the entire Church. The members of the Small Christian Community join in the celebration of the Eucharist in the parish. They take part in the life of the local church and perform ministries within it.

### **Ecclesiological emphases at the Second Vatican Council**

In order to evaluate the theological importance of the development of Small Christian Communities and to assess their relevance for the future development of Church life in our social and ecclesial context I shall now look at them from different angles. I shall begin by examining this 'new way of being Church' against the background of the fundamental ecclesiological statements made by the Second Vatican Council. Given the prominent status of Bible-sharing, a number of questions arise as to the theological significance of the Holy Scripture and its importance for the life of the Church. In conclusion, I will investigate the pneumatological implications of this approach.

### **Church at the local level**

The defining element of Small Christian Communities is their ability to establish networks in the places where their members live. The Council recognised the life of the local churches as a fully adequate manifestation of the Church. The dogmatic constitution *Lumen Gentium* says in its renowned formula about the particular churches headed by bishops: "...in and from which churches comes into being the one and only Catholic Church."<sup>267</sup> However, the real presence of

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<sup>267</sup> LG 23. On the ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council see: Kasper, W., *Die Kirche*

the Church of Christ is also expressly said to be in the local congregations of the faithful by dint of the fact that the Gospel is proclaimed and the Eucharist celebrated in them: “In these communities, though frequently small and poor, or living in the Diaspora, Christ is present, and in virtue of His presence there is brought together one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church.”<sup>268</sup> At the same time, though, emphasis is always also placed on their close ties with the pastors, especially the bishop, who is the manifestation in person of the unity and communion of the universal Church.

Very useful for the theological classification of the Small Christian Communities are the statements made about Basic Ecclesial Communities in the post-Council documents (above all *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, *Redemptoris Missio* and the continental Synods).<sup>269</sup> The earlier documents reflect a marked ambivalence. Wherever the Basic Ecclesial Communities are firmly anchored in the life of the Church they are welcomed as a sign of the vitality of the Church and as a point of departure for comprehensive evangelization. However, they are sharply criticised wherever they adopt an “attitude of fault-finding and of rejection”, especially with regard to the Church hierarchy.<sup>270</sup> The background to this essentially defensive stance is the massive conflict over the Ecclesial Base Communities in Latin America. The tone towards the Basic Ecclesial Communities is distinctly friendlier in the later documents, in which they are recognised as constituting an important development of the Church in the period after the Council.<sup>271</sup> It is readily apparent that the criteria applied to their ecclesiality are closely linked to the model of the Early Church (Acts 2): “Every community, if it is to be Christian, must be founded on Christ and live in him, as it listens to the word of God, focuses its prayer on the Eucharist, lives in a communion marked by oneness of

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Jesu Christi, WKGS 11, Freiburg i. Br. 2008; Pottmeyer, H. J., Die konziliare Vision einer neuen Kirchengestalt, in: Hennecke, C. (ed.), *Kleine Christliche Gemeinschaften verstehen, Ein Weg, Kirche mit den Menschen zu sein*, Würzburg 2009, 31-46.

<sup>268</sup> LG 26.

<sup>269</sup> See: Scaria, F., Die Ekklesiologie der Kleinen Christlichen Gemeinschaften, Ein indischer Ansatz und seine Konsequenzen, in: Hennecke, C. (ed.), o. cit., 89-125.

<sup>270</sup> EN 58.

<sup>271</sup> This assessment is particularly noticeable in RM 51; it is echoed in the document *Ecclesia in Asia* (1999) 25.

heart and soul, and shares according to the needs of its members (cf. Acts 2:42-47).<sup>272</sup>

### The Church and communion

‘Communion’ is a central element in this ‘new way of being Church’. Communion (*communio*) is also the term that has attracted most attention in endeavours to gain a theological grasp of what the Council means by Church.<sup>273</sup>

The Church’s concept of itself as a communion is expressed first of all at the structural level: communion as a *communio ecclesiarum*; the establishment of communion structures at all levels of Church life as forms of participation (e.g. the setting up of parish and diocesan pastoral councils). The *communio* structure is not limited just to the communion of different local churches. It means that all those who form a communion in the Church also constitute a communion among themselves: in this context Church is understood to be a communion of communities. The Small Christian Communities are likewise incorporated into this communion as the smallest cell of the ecclesial *communio*, as it were.

In addition to this structural aspect of the concept of the Church as *communio* there is, above all, a sacramental dimension: communion in the Eucharist is the inner source of energy in the ecclesial *communio*. The Church continually reconstitutes itself as the Body of Christ. Small Christian Communities must, therefore, be integrated into this sacramental reality of the ecclesial *communio*, otherwise they forfeit their ecclesial character – in the Catholic understanding, at least.

If communion constitutes the essence of the Church, all areas and all experiences of Church life must be imbued with the spirit of *communio*. In his pastoral programme for the Church at the beginning of the third millennium John Paul II called for a spirituality of the communion: “To make the Church *the home and the school of communion*: that is the great challenge facing us in the millennium which is now beginning, if we wish to be faithful to God’s plan

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<sup>272</sup> RM 51.

<sup>273</sup> See: Walter Kasper, o. cit. especially 405-425.

and respond to the world's deepest yearnings."<sup>274</sup> In his letter John Paul II specifies some elements of a spirituality of the communion. Spirituality of the communion means first of all that the heart must focus its gaze on the mystery of the Trinity that resides within us and whose light must be discerned on the faces of the brothers and sisters beside us. Spirituality of the communion also means the ability to recognise the brothers and sisters in the faith in the deep unity of the mystical Body, i.e. 'someone who belongs to me' so that I can share his joys and sorrows, anticipate his wishes and tend to his needs, and ultimately offer him deep and genuine friendship. Spirituality of the communion is, in addition, the capacity, in particular, to see the positive sides of other people so that they can be accepted and prized as a gift of God. Finally, spirituality of the communion means 'making room' for one's brothers, which can be done by everyone bearing the burdens of the others and resisting the temptation to put themselves first.

"Communion must be cultivated and extended day by day and at every level in the structures of each Church's life."<sup>275</sup> Such spaces in which communion can be experienced and really lived will arise, in particular, wherever groups get together whose size leaves room for encounter and exchange. A biblical strengthening of this need might be seen in one aspect of the parable of the Feeding of the Five Thousand, as told by Luke. There Jesus says to his disciples: "Get them to sit down in parties of about fifty."<sup>276</sup>

Communion has an internal sacramental dimension in the Eucharist. But it also has a sacramental dimension that is directed outwards, wherever it is a question of the mission of the entire Church, which is to be the sign and tool of the unity of all men in God and amongst themselves. Small Christian Communities are not communities of choice; rather they are directed at everyone in the respective neighbourhood. It thus becomes apparent that the Gospel and its message of salvation are directed at all people.

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<sup>274</sup> *Novo Millennio Ineunte* (2000) 43. See Scaria, o. cit., 101-103.

<sup>275</sup> *Novo Millennio Ineunte* 45.

<sup>276</sup> Luke 9:14.

## Missionary character of the Church

The Church offers the prospect of the Kingdom of God, from which arises its inherent mission of being a sign and instrument for the union with God and the unity of the whole human race.<sup>277</sup> If reference to the Church as a community is detached from the prospect of the Kingdom of God, this will likely give rise to an ecclesiocentric view and a tendency for Church groups and communities to adopt a self-centred mentality (Pottmeyer).

One of the key features of Small Christian Communities is that they carry out the social mission of the Church in specific localities. In this respect the experience gathered hitherto by Small Christian communities in the USA<sup>278</sup> is of interest, as is the initial response in Germany.

It is important to note here what is said about ecclesiology in the decree on mission activity *Ad Gentes*, which states that the Church is missionary by her very nature.<sup>279</sup> All those who have been baptized take part in this missionary task of the Church. It involves announcing the Good News to all people the world over, but also in the neighbourhoods where individual Christians live. *Evangelii Nuntiandi* states that evangelising is the vocation proper to the Church, her deepest identity.<sup>280</sup> In the Council documents the Church is no longer understood to be merely a hierarchical institution, but a fraternal community of the People of God, whose members bear common responsibility for the mission of the Church.<sup>281</sup>

## On the importance of the Holy Scripture for the life of the Church

A reciprocal relationship therefore exists between the Church and evangelisation: the Church comes about through evangelisation

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<sup>277</sup> LG 1.

<sup>278</sup> See: Lutz, B., Small Christian Communities aus US-amerikanischer Perspektive, in: Hennecke, C. (ed.), o. cit. 241-256.

<sup>279</sup> AG 2.

<sup>280</sup> EN 14.

<sup>281</sup> See: Chapter II of LG, Participation of all baptised persons in the life and mission of the Church; participatory understanding of the Church; emphasis on the common priesthood of all believers.

by Jesus and the Twelve. In turn, it is sent by Christ. The term evangelisation describes the very essence of the Church: it says something crucial about the relationship between the Gospel and the Church.

### **The Church in relation to the Word of God**

In his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* Paul VI emphasises that the Church, as the vehicle of evangelisation, begins by evangelising itself: “She is the community of believers [...] and she needs to listen unceasingly to what she must believe, to her reasons for hoping, to the new commandment of love. She is the People of God immersed in the world, and often tempted by idols, and she always needs to hear the proclamation of the “mighty works of God” which converted her to the Lord; she always needs to be called together afresh by Him and reunited. In brief, this means that she has a constant need of being evangelized, if she wishes to retain freshness, vigour and strength in order to proclaim the Gospel.”<sup>282</sup>

The Church grows as a result of the encounter with God’s Word. The Church must repeatedly re-address the Word so that it can itself proclaim this Word in a credible and effective manner. This explains the significance of Bible-sharing for the life of the Small Christian Communities. It is a deeply spiritual experience that is ultimately directed towards encountering Jesus Christ himself. To echo the words of the Church father Jerome: “Ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ.”<sup>283</sup> The Council’s Constitution on Divine Revelation took up this formulation, thus ushering in a paradigm shift in the biblical pastoral ministry.

The Constitution on Divine Revelation *Dei Verbum* invites all those who believe in Christ to learn, by frequent reading of the divine Scriptures, the “excellent knowledge of Jesus Christ”.<sup>284</sup> The Pontifical Biblical Commission rightly referred to this statement as “something new”.<sup>285</sup> Whereas the Church’s magisterium responded with extreme scepticism to the appearance of the first vernacular translation in the

<sup>282</sup> EN 15.

<sup>283</sup> Thus Hieronymus in the Prologue to his Commentary on Isaiah (PL 24,17).

<sup>284</sup> DV 25.

<sup>285</sup> The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church (1993), IV.C.2.

High Middle Ages (associated with the Waldensian and Albigensian reform movements) and, in particular, to the independent, uncontrolled reading of the Bible by lay people during the age of the Reformation, to which it applied the strictest of conditions, the Council not only encourages the spiritual reading and interpretation of scripture by clerics and Religious, but also explicitly recommends it to all Christians.

The Council document regards both individual and common study of the Scripture as a deeply spiritual experience. Reading of the Holy Scripture is to be accompanied by prayer so that God and man may talk together.<sup>286</sup> This high regard for the spiritual reading and interpretation of scripture is in keeping with the emphasis on the presence of Christ in the proclaimed Word that is to be found in the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy of the Second Vatican Council.

### **Different approaches to the Holy Scriptures as the Word of God**

This new importance of the Holy Scriptures for the life of the Church is rooted in the conviction that they are a 'common treasure' of all the People of God. All members of the Church are, therefore, entitled to a correspondingly active role in the interpretation of the Bible. Ralf Huning distinguishes three different approaches to the Word of God to which three different hermeneutical spaces can be assigned.<sup>287</sup>

The first approach is provided by ecclesial tradition, above all in the liturgy and Church doctrine.<sup>288</sup> It leads to the liturgical-institutional space that is determined by the principle of tradition. Here God's Word is experienced from the perspective of the faith. The Word of God is something given and not disposable to the individual believer. It is more than mere information, it is light and strength; ultimately God himself is encountered in the Word proclaimed.

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<sup>286</sup> DV 25.

<sup>287</sup> Ralf Huning, Die Bedeutung der gemeinschaftlichen Bibellektüre der Gläubigen für die katholische Kirche. Bibeltheologische und hermeneutische Überlegungen, in: Hennecke, C. (ed.), o. cit., 159-186.

<sup>288</sup> Ibid. 170f.

A very different hermeneutical approach to God's Word is provided by the academic space.<sup>289</sup> Here attention is focused primarily on the written text that conveys the Word of God. Scholarly methods of textual criticism are used to supply a historical reconstruction of the normative text stripped of any later addenda and revisions. Another important outcome of this academic handling of the biblical texts is their hermeneutically adequate translation into modern languages.

In addition to these two familiar approaches to the Holy Scripture, Huning distinguishes a third approach that leads to the opening up of a 'community space'.<sup>290</sup> This hermeneutical space is communitarian, because the focus here is on all believers as Bible-reading subjects. Here, specific access to the reality documented in the Scripture is primarily via intuition, experience and practical knowledge of life (wise discernment). The focus of interest is not on the text as such but on contemporary life as the context in which there is a wish to hear God's voice.

These three hermeneutical spaces are not devoid of any interconnection. The subjects of the respective spaces are related to each other in a variety of ways. The doctrinal proclamation of the Word of God, for instance, must not be in complete contradiction to scholarly findings. It should also relate to the experiences of the faithful if it is to be understood and accepted. In the academic space a far-reaching isolation from the other hermeneutical spaces would ultimately lead to the research findings losing their relevance. In the community space consideration of the doctrinal tradition of the Church and scholarly findings helps to protect against any subjectivist monopolising of the Bible and against ideological bias. "Therefore, in the Catholic Church listening to God's Word with the help of the Bible should be a process of dialogue in which all the members of the Church have a role to play."<sup>291</sup>

### **The People of God's sense of the faith**

Everyone has their own share in the interpretation of the Holy Scripture because they are living members of the one Church.

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<sup>289</sup> Ibid. 171f.

<sup>290</sup> Ibid. 172-175.

<sup>291</sup> Ibid. 176.

This emphasis on the ecclesial nature of common access to the Holy Scripture expresses the specifically ‘Catholic character’ of the approach taken by the Small Christian Communities. In contrast to a distinctly Reformation-based understanding, according to which the Church is subordinate to the Scripture, the Catholic understanding is that everything to do with interpretation of the Scripture is ultimately subject to the judgment of the Church. However, the paradigm shift undertaken by the Council in its understanding of revelation and tradition consists in the fact that this judgment is now no longer the exclusive prerogative of the magisterium of the hierarchy, but relates to the Church community as a whole.

This more comprehensive understanding finds expression primarily in the doctrine of the *sensus fidelium*: “Sense of the faith is interpreted as the God-given capacity of the faithful to take an active part in finding the truth of the faith and its realisation in life.”<sup>292</sup> In keeping with the foundational statement contained in *Lumen Gentium* 12, the people of God are enabled by their sense of the faith to penetrate more deeply into the faith and apply it more fully in life – under the guidance of the teaching authority. The *sensus fidelium* is at work wherever the people of God actively receive a statement of faith, because they intuitively perceive the truth of this statement. The basis for this ability deriving from the *sensus fidelium* is the intuitively perceived powerful presence of God in the life of man.<sup>293</sup>

Special significance attaches here to the poor and to ordinary people. People of humble origins are regarded in the Gospels as preferred listeners to the Word: Glad Tidings are brought to the poor.<sup>294</sup> Things that are hidden from the learned and the clever are revealed to little children.<sup>295</sup> It is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs.<sup>296</sup>

<sup>292</sup> Koch, G., Glaubenssinn, Wahrheitsfindung im Miteinander, in: idem. (ed.), Mitsprache im Glauben? Vom Glaubenssinn der Gläubigen, Würzburg 1993, 99-114, 99f.

<sup>293</sup> In this respect Huning (o. cit., 83) refers to Mesters, C., Por trás das palavras, Volume 1, Um estudo sobre a porta de entrada no mundo da Bíblia, Petrópolis 1977, 35.

<sup>294</sup> Luke 4:18; 7:22; Matthew 5:3; 11:5.

<sup>295</sup> Matthew 11:25; Luke 10:21.

<sup>296</sup> Mark 10:14.

Special consideration is given to this aspect in the official document on the Interpretation of the Bible in the Church (1993): “Those who in their powerlessness and lack of human resources find themselves forced to put their trust in God alone and in his justice have a capacity for hearing and interpreting the word of God which should be taken into account by the whole church, it demands a response on the social level as well.”<sup>297</sup> According to the Pontifical Biblical Commission, the poorest and the lowliest “can bring to the interpretation of the Bible and to its actualization a light more penetrating, from the spiritual and existential point of view, than that which comes from a learning that relies upon its own resources alone”. In interpreting this statement, Mesters applies in analogous fashion the scholastic category of ‘connatural cognition’: the term connaturalness denotes a natural relationship between the cognizer and the object of the act of cognition. Applied to the poorest and lowliest, this means that the people literally understand what is written in the Scripture because it is existentially related to the people in the Bible.<sup>298</sup>

Applied to the Small Christian Communities this means that, by dint of a comparison with their own experiences, they acquire intuitive access to the message of the Holy Scripture and learn something as a result. Proof of what they have learned is supplied by what they do in their lives and their faith. The actions taken by the Bible readers make it possible to see whether they have really understood the meaning of the passages in the Bible from which they derive their own models for action. They make their sense of faith visible by virtue of what they do: through the benefits generated by their actions.<sup>299</sup>

### **Church as the work of the Spirit**

The sense of faith, which enables the People of God to adhere unwaveringly to the faith, penetrate it more deeply and apply it more

<sup>297</sup> Interpretation of the Bible in the Church, III.B.3

<sup>298</sup> Mesters, C., *Das Verständnis der Schrift in einigen brasilianischen Basisgemeinden*, in: *Concilium* 16 (1980) 10, 561-566, 564. Mesters establishes a connection between the Pauline statement about the weakness chosen by God to destroy what is strong and the Revelation of God in the inadequacy and imperfection of human language. Corresponding to this to some extent is the weakness of the preferred listeners to the Word, *o. cit.* 176.

<sup>299</sup> Comparison with the seed of the Word which sprout in the soil of life and bring forth their fruit; see also: EN 41, the witness of life.

fully in their lives, is a sign of the working of the Spirit in the Church; it is aroused and sustained by the Spirit of truth.<sup>300</sup>

This is a further seminal notion that is of significance for the classification of Small Christian Communities: the Church is the work of the Spirit. The Spirit is a vital principle for the communities; it illuminates them and guides their lives. The Spirit enables the Church to seek the signs of the times and interpret them in the light of the Gospel: “Motivated by this faith, it labours to decipher authentic signs of God’s presence and purpose in the happenings, needs and desires in which this People has a part along with other men of our age.”<sup>301</sup> These signs are, therefore, in need of interpretation – in the light of the Gospel, in the faith and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. This interpretation can only succeed, “if the meaning of the facts correlates with the positive revelation of God’s plan of salvation, which is centred on Christ, and is illuminated by it.”<sup>302</sup>

The Spirit at work in the Church is the Spirit of Jesus Christ. It reminds the Church of the self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ. It keeps alive the memory of what God achieved through His Son. It leads the Church deeper into the truth of this Revelation so that it can discern the significance of the event for its own presence. Hence there is a close connection between the Spirit and the Word of the Holy Scripture. It is the connection between the Spirit and the Word that turns the Word of the Scripture into the Word of God which can make its influence felt in the present: “The Spirit updates the Word on the basis of its literal meaning. It enables the Word to speak to each generation in its respective cultural milieu and situation.”<sup>303</sup>

The Spirit is the Spirit of the truth, which ensures that what has happened for our salvation in the past is present today. At the same time it is, above all, also an eschatological reality. It is the Spirit prophesied for the last days. The Spirit acts with a view to the future, moving into a space and a time that are opened up by the Word. It moves the Passover of Christ in the eschatology forwards in the direction

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<sup>300</sup> LG 12.

<sup>301</sup> GS 11.

<sup>302</sup> Congar, Y., *Der Heilige Geist*, Freiburg i. Br. 1982, 186.

<sup>303</sup> *Ibid.* 182.

of Creation – it drives the Gospel on into the period of history that is yet to come. On the one hand, therefore, God has said and given us everything in Jesus Christ and yet there are new developments, and things really do happen in history.<sup>304</sup> But the Spirit is and continues to be the spirit of Jesus Christ [...]. A pneumatology can only be healthy if it relates to Christ. In the combined power of Christ and the Holy Spirit the Church can be tremendously open in its endeavours to achieve its catholicity [...].<sup>305</sup>

Hence, the study of the Scripture in the Small Christian Communities is primarily a spiritual act, for it is only in the Spirit – while engaging with the Word of the Holy Scripture – that an encounter with Christ can take place, that the Word of the Scripture can become the living Word of God which can unfold its power in the present. This spiritual occurrence goes beyond mere individual edification; it has a community function, one that can generate community. The Church is built up through the encounter with the living Word of God (*creatura verbi*), because it is repeatedly reinvigorated with the life that constitutes its very essence and pushes forward the historical development of this essence.

One final facet is important in pneumatological terms for the classification of Small Christian Communities: the Spirit is given to all. It is God's eschatological gift to all the People of God<sup>306</sup>, especially to the poorest and lowliest. The Spirit is given to each and every individual; at the same time it is given to all together. It is the Spirit that unites the Church and brings together the many in the communion of saints. For that reason the Spirit can only really be at work where the community of the entire Church is sought and experienced.

### **Outcome for the Small Christian Communities**

Summarizing the thoughts outlined above, it is possible to conclude that Small Christian Communities can be a viable means to implement the ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council in the life of the local churches. Small Christian Communities can contribute

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<sup>304</sup> Ibid. 189.

<sup>305</sup> Ibid. 190.

<sup>306</sup> Cf. Joel 3:1f.

to a revitalised presence of the Church in places where people live. Wherever they respond to the realities of life, to the social and cultural situation, they foster the inculturation of the Gospel in the respective context. Conversely, however, this means that the path will of necessity vary depending on the individual circumstances. Successful models cannot simply be uncritically transferred to different contexts but must be constantly revised and developed in response to specific challenges.

It is important to note that the Small Christian Communities model does not represent a structural principle, the purpose of which is to break down large parishes into small and manageable sub-units. When reference is made to a new way of being Church, this does not mean first and foremost a new organisational principle but a way of finding the road along which the Spirit wishes to take the Church – without knowing what this road looks like in detail. This new way of being Church presumes, firstly, a great deal of openness in respect of the road down which the Spirit wishes to take the Church and, secondly, considerable trust in the sources that have been repeatedly used in the past to renew the life of the Church: prayer and the Holy Scripture.

The real players on this road are not the pastoral strategists, but the people who live and bear witness to their faith in everyday life. The Council has strengthened confidence in the fundamental recognition that the Spirit can make its influence felt in all members of the People of God and that it can speak in a special way through the weak, the dependent and the disregarded, in particular. This realisation should lead to an attitude of humility and, above all, of attentiveness so that the signs of the times can be correctly interpreted and the presence of the Spirit perceived in the challenges posed by the given situation. For that reason people who give their faith a perceptible and credible form by the way they act in their daily lives can become the nucleus of a Church with a new missionary purpose in our time.

The spirit of the truth is promised to the Church as a whole. Hence individual groups and communities should not isolate themselves. They can only maintain their ecclesial character to the extent that they continuously actively seek integration into the comprehensive ecclesial communion. The presence of the Lord experienced in the Word must,

therefore, always be connected with the lived and celebrated union in the Eucharist. Here the sacramental communion with the Lord is connected with lived communion, with the entire Church and its shepherds. This 'Catholic principle' prevents the Church from disintegrating into individual autonomous free churches. It maintains and strengthens the communion of the Church, which is guided by the spirit of freedom and held together in unity.

# Historical Development of Small Christian Communities



# Historical Development of the Small Christian Communities / Basic Ecclesial Communities in Africa

Joseph G. Healey

At its 6<sup>th</sup> Plenary Assembly from 20 November to 2 December, 1961 the Zaire Episcopal Conference (hereafter called by its present name the Democratic Republic of the Congo or DRC) approved a pastoral plan to promote “Living Ecclesial Communities” (also called “Living Christian Communities”). *Communautés Ecclésiales Vivantes de Base* (CEVB) is the full French term for SCCs. The bishops opted for these communities to be more important than the well-known mission structures (church buildings, schools, hospitals). These Living Ecclesial Communities were said to be the only way to make the church more “African” and close to the people. So the very first Small Christian Communities (SCCs)<sup>307</sup> in Africa started in DRC in 1961.

Then came the historic Second Vatican Council ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Second\\_Vatican\\_Council](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Second_Vatican_Council)) (1962-65). Small Christian Communities developed as a result of putting the communion ecclesiology and teachings of Vatican II into practice. The founding fathers of AMECEA (<http://www.amecea.org>) (Association of Member Episcopal Conferences in Eastern Africa) and other Episcopal Conferences in Africa had a vision that focused on the communion (*koinonia*) and service (*diakonia*) aspects and developed SCCs as a concrete expression of, and realization of, the Church as Family Model

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<sup>307</sup> Small Christian Communities (SCCs) is an umbrella term used in this article and is the common expression for this new way of being church in Africa. Even some writers in French prefer the term SCC because it indicates the “scale” of the communities. Different terms are used on the continent of Africa. BCC means Basic Christian Community. BEC means Base or Basic Ecclesial Community. CEB means *Communautés Ecclésiales de Base*. CEVB means *Communautés Ecclésiales Vivantes de Base*.

of Church. Latin America, Africa and Asia (especially the Philippines) all pioneered the development of a SCC/BCC/BEC Model of Church. After considerable research and debate, many specialists feel that quite independently of one another these three areas of the Catholic Church in the Global South *simultaneously* experienced the extraordinary growth of SCCs. Thus, contrary to some misinformed interpretations, the African experience did not come from Latin America, but developed on its own. African SCCs have developed mainly as a pastoral, parish-based model.

The very beginning of SCCs in Eastern Africa can be traced back to the parishes of the Luo-speaking Deanery (especially Nyarombo, Ingri and Masonga Parishes) in North Mara in Musoma Diocese in northwestern Tanzania in 1966. This began with research on the social structures and community values of the African Independent Churches among the Luo Ethnic Group. The first terms used were *chama* (meaning “small group”) and “small communities of Christians” (forerunner of SCCs). The Maryknoll missionaries focused on the formation of natural communities. By 1968 Nyarombo Parish had 20 small communities and five were started in a nearby parish. During the Seminar Study Year (SSY) in Tanzania in 1969 the concept and praxis of SCCs that were then called “local Church communities” were first articulated as a priority in both rural and later urban parishes.

The actual launching of SCCs in DRC goes back to the period 1971-1972 when there was a confrontation between President Mobutu Sese Seko and the Catholic Church. Mobutu’s “authenticity” campaign suppressed the missionary institutes and associations. To meet the crisis the church established the priority of the creation and organization of SCCs. The pioneering Cardinal Joseph Malula of Kinshasa Archdiocese, DRC stated: “The Living Ecclesial Communities are slowly becoming the ordinary place of Christian life, with the parish as the communion of the Living Ecclesial Communities.” This included emphasizing lay ministries and implementing Vatican II’s theology of laity, “the People of God.”

The bishops of the neighboring Republic of the Congo closely followed DRC’s leadership in their 1973 meeting. SCCs were built upon the extended family. In 1974 the Episcopal Conference of Cameroon

followed suit. The expatriate missionaries in Northern Cameroon and neighboring Chad had already begun to channel the first evangelization into SCCs. In war-torn Burundi and Rwanda a similar six-year renewal plan was conceived in 1976 uniting people on every hill into “community meetings.” In Francophone West Africa the lead was taken by Burkina Faso in order that each and every one would feel truly part of and fully responsible for the Church as a family (1977). The South African Catholic Bishops Conference made a decisive step in the same direction in 1975.

During the World Synod of Bishops in Rome in 1971 on “Justice in the World” the African delegates noted that SCCs already existed in Africa. At the World Synod of Bishops in Rome in 1977 on “Catechesis” the Bishops in Africa declared themselves clearly in favor of SCCs.

The AMECEA Study Conference on “Planning for the Church in Eastern Africa in the 1980s” in Nairobi, Kenya in December, 1973 stated: “We have to insist on building church life and work on Basic Christian Communities in both rural and urban areas. Church life must be based on the communities in which everyday life and work take place: those basic and manageable social groups whose members can experience real inter-personal relationships and feel a sense of communal belonging, both in living and working.” This pastoral policy was in the context of the statement: “We are convinced that in these countries of Eastern Africa it is time for the Church to become truly local, that is, self-ministering, self-propagating and self-supporting.”

This is rooted in the theology that SCCs are not optional, but are the basic unit/basic cell/basic building block/basic foundation/most local expression of the Catholic Church. That is why ideally one should greet *all* people as Small Christian Community members. SCCs are different from the traditional parish associations and sodalities that are voluntary and often base on international constitutions and guidelines. Even a priest or religious can become a member of the SCC in his specific neighbourhood or geographical area (that is, where he or she is actually living).

Two of the founders of SCCs in Eastern Africa were Bishop Patrick Kalilombe, MAfr, of Lilongwe Diocese, Malawi and Bishop Christopher Mwoleka of Rulenge Diocese, Tanzania.

The AMECEA Study Conference on “Building Small Christian Communities” took place in Nairobi, Kenya in 1976. The key statement was: “Systematic formation of Small Christian Communities should be the key pastoral priority in the years to come in Eastern Africa.” This is the single most important statement made about SCCs. The meeting went on to affirm the essential ecclesial character and characteristics of Small Christian Communities by stating: “The [Small] Christian Communities we are trying to build are simply the most local incarnations of the One, Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church.”

The Catholic bishops in Eastern Africa chose this SCC pastoral priority as the best way to build up the local churches to be truly self-ministering (self-governing), self-propagating (self-spreading), and self-supporting (self-reliant and self-sustainable). The three selfs are essential characteristics of SCCs as the base/basic level of the church, and by extension, of the Local Church. This is a real self-actualization of the church. The family, the SCC, the outstation, the sub-parish, the parish and the diocese reflect a “Communion of Communities Model of Church” starting from below, from the grassroots.

During this meeting the word “small” was specifically chosen to avoid certain undertones of the word “basic.” Bishop Raphael Ndingi (later Archbishop of Nairobi, Kenya) stated that to call our grassroots communities “small” instead of “basic” is another indication that the movement in Africa was growing on its own, quite independent of what was happening along the same lines in other places such as Latin America.

In 1975 Burkina Faso opted for the creation of SCCs on the model of Church as Family. Similar decisions were made by other Episcopal Conferences in Africa.

1978 saw the birth of Bible Sharing/Gospel Sharing at the Lumko Missiological Institute in South Africa. Excellent SCC training manuals began to be published that popularized the Lumko “Seven Steps” Method of Bible Sharing/Gospel Sharing. Altogether there are eight Gospel sharing methods that can be adapted to the local context and situation. These training manuals have been used throughout the Africa.

The AMECEA Study Conference on “The Implementation of

the AMECEA Bishops' Pastoral Priority of Building Small Christian Communities: An Evaluation" took place in Zomba, Malawi in 1979. One pastoral resolution stated: "SCCs are an effective way of developing the mission dimension of the church at the most local level, and of making people feel that they are really part of the church's evangelizing work."

The Bishops of Africa placed SCCs at the center of their pastoral strategy in two major SECAM (<http://www.sceam-secam.org>) (Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar) documents: *Justice and Evangelization in Africa* (Yaounde, Cameroon, 1981) and *Church and Human Development in Africa* (Kinshasa, DRC, 1984). Pastoral Centers in Africa have been very important in promoting this SCC Model of Church such as: AMECEA Pastoral Institute, Gaba, Eldoret, Kenya; Ave Maria Pastoral Center, Tzaneen, South Africa; Kenema Pastoral Center, Kenema, Sierra Leone; and Lumko Missiological Institute, Germiston, Delmenville, South Africa.

The AMECEA Study Conference on "Evangelization with its Central Issues: Inculturation, Small Christian Communities and Priestly, Religious and Christian Formation" in Lusaka, Zambia in 1992 focused on an "Evaluation of AMECEA." The research findings identified four AMECEA priorities that included "Promotion of SCCs" and recommended in-service training for animators of SCCs. This conference reiterated the SCC pastoral commitment by stating: "So we repeat that SCCs are not optional in our churches; they are central to the life of faith and the ministry of evangelization."

A major step was the First African Synod in Rome in April, 1994 on the theme "The Church in Africa and Her Evangelizing Mission to the Year 2000" with five main topics: "Proclamation of the Good News of Salvation," "Inculturation," "Dialogue," "Justice and Peace" and the "Means of Social Communications." Of the 211 interventions during the first two weeks of the First African Synod, there were 29 interventions on SCCs (the fourth highest number after the topics of justice, inculturation and laity). Bishop Francisco Joao Siloto of Chimoio Diocese, Mozambique said that "these communities are an expression of African communitarianism and the only true way of inculturation for the African Church." Archbishop Cornelius Fontem Esua of Bamenda, Cameroon said that "it is necessary and urgent to

put Sacred Scripture into the hands of the faithful so it can be the source and inspiration for the life and activities of Small Christian Communities.” Archbishop Zacchaeus Okoth of Kisumu Archdiocese, Kenya said that „Small Christian Communities help implement the ecclesiology of communion... It is of paramount importance that the Synod on Africa recommends the establishment of Small Christian Communities in the parishes, so that the new model of the parish for the year 2000 will be the one of a community of communities.“

Regarding the “Ecclesiology of the Church-as-Family” the *Final Message of the Bishops of Africa to the People of God* in Section 28 on “The Church-as-Family and Small Christian Communities” states: “The Church, the Family of God, implies the creation of small communities at the human level, living or basic ecclesial communities...These individual Churches-as-Families have the task of working to transform society.”

1995 saw the publication and promulgation of Blessed John Paul II’s Apostolic Exhortation *The Church in Africa* in Yaounde, Cameroon, Johannesburg, South Africa and in Nairobi, Kenya between 14-20 September, 1995. Numbers 23 and 89 treat SCCs:

Number 23 under “The Family of God in the Synodal Process:” “If this Synod is prepared well, it will be able to involve all levels of the Christian Community: individuals, small communities, parishes, Dioceses, and local, national and international bodies.”

Number 89 under “Living (or Vital) Christian Communities:” “Right from the beginning, the Synod Fathers recognized that the Church as Family cannot reach her full potential as Church unless she is divided into communities small enough to foster close human relationships. The Assembly described the characteristics of such communities as follows: primarily they should be places engaged in evangelizing themselves, so that subsequently they can bring the Good News to others; they should moreover be communities which pray and listen to God’s Word, encourage the members themselves to take on responsibility, learn to live an ecclesial life, and reflect on different human problems in the light of the Gospel. Above all, these communities are to be committed to living Christ’s love for everybody, a love which transcends the limits of natural solidarity of clans, tribes or other interest groups.”

SCCs became an important part of the *National Plans for the Implementation of the African Synod* in the AMECEA countries. *The African Synod Comes Home – A Simplified*

*Text* (Pauline Publications Africa, 1995) and other post-synodal documents stressed the importance of SCCs in the follow-up and implementation of the recommendations of the First African Synod. This included developing SCCs as a concrete expression of, and realization of, the Church-as-Family Model of Church. This SCC Pastoral Priority was clear in Ndola Diocese, Zambia. The *Ndola Diocesan Guidelines* states: “We share in the universal Church’s mission...This is achieved through the establishment of active and fully involved Small Christian Communities.”

A key turning point for the growth of SCCs in Tanzania was promoting a model of church from the bottom up. “The implementation of the new Constitution of the National Lay Council in 1998 required that the election of lay leaders in parishes throughout Tanzania start at the level of SCCs and move upwards. This insured that the parish council leaders would be chosen from those who were already leaders in their SCCs – thus true representation from below. Such decisions gave full confidence to the faithful and opened new possibilities for the laity in the local church.” This can also be seen in diocesan synods on the local level. The booklet for the Synod of Mwanza Archdiocese in Tanzania in 2002 contains 105 references to Jumuiya Ndogo Ndogo za Kikristo (JNNK), the Swahili expression for SCCs.

Next was the AMECEA Study Conference on “Deeper Evangelization in the Third Millennium” in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania in 2002.” Section 7 of the Pastoral Resolutions is on “Building the Church as a Family of God by Continuing to Foster and/or Revitalize the Small Christian Communities,” No. 43 states: “We recommend that a programme on the theological and pastoral value of Small Christian Communities be included in the normal curriculum of the Major Seminaries and houses of formation of both men and women.”

On 19 March, 2009 in Yaounde, Cameroon Pope Benedict XVI promulgated the *Instrumentum Laboris* (“Working Document”) of the 2009 Second African Synod.

While the English text of the *Lineamenta* published in 2006 uses the term “living ecclesial communities,” the English text of the *Instrumentum Laboris* published in 2009 uses the more common term “Small Christian Communities” (note the capitals). The French text uses “Communautés Ecclésiales Vivantes.”

SCCs are mentioned in 12 times in the *Instrumentum Laboris* and twice in the footnotes. This is significantly more than in the *Lineamenta* in which “living ecclesial communities” are mentioned three times in the document and twice in the questionnaire. This increase in the importance given to SCCs is clearly due to the many responses from the Episcopal Conferences in Africa and to other answers to the 32 questions of the original questionnaire.

The Second African Synod itself took place in Rome from 4-25 October, 2009 on the theme: “The Church in Africa in Service to Reconciliation, Justice and Peace.” No. 22 of the *Message of the Bishops of Africa to the People of God* states: “Here we would like to reiterate the recommendation of *Ecclesia in Africa* about the importance of Small Christian Communities (cf. *EIA*, 89). Beyond prayer, you must also arm yourself with sufficient knowledge of the Christian faith to be able to “give a proof of the hope that you bear” (1 *Peter* 3:15) in the marketplaces of ideas...We strongly recommend the basic sources of Catholic faith: the *Holy Bible*, *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, and most relevant to the theme of the Synod, *The Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*.” Small Christian Communities are mentioned seven times in the “Final List of [57] Propositions.”

The Faculty of Theology of the Catholic University of the Congo under the patronage of the National Episcopal Conference of the Congo sponsored the 27<sup>th</sup> Theological Week of Kinshasa in Kinshasa, DRC from 21 to 25 February, 2011 on the theme “The Experience of Basic Living Ecclesial Communities in the Democratic Republic of the Congo: Theological and Pastoral Perspectives after 50 Years” (“L’expérience des CEVB en RD Congo: Perspectives théologiques et pastorales 50 ans après”). This conference commemorated the 50th Anniversary of “Living Ecclesial Communities” in DRC (1961-2011). As a sign of unity and solidarity with other parts of Africa, in the day devoted to “Other Experiences of CEVB in DRC and Elsewhere,” Father

Pius Rutechura, the then Secretary General of AMECEA (and now the Vice-Chancellor of CUEA), gave a paper under the heading “Echoes of English-speaking Africa: AMECEA” entitled “The Experience of the AMECEA Region with Small Christian Communities, Pastoral Priority since the 1970s.” Father Godefroid Manunga, SVD, the Director of the Lumko Missiological Institute, gave a paper on “The Experience of South Africa.”

Pope Benedict XVI promulgated the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Africa's Commitment (Africae Munus)* in Ouidah, Benin in West Africa on 19 November, 2011. The four sections related to SCCs are:

Number 131 under “Lay People:” ”It can be helpful for you to form associations in order to continue shaping your Christian conscience and supporting one another in the struggle for justice and peace. The Small Christian Communities (SCCs) and the ‘new communities’ are fundamental structures for fanning the flame of your Baptism.”

COMMENTARY: In most official documents of the Catholic Church the traditional parish is the basic juridical unit of the Church. It is significant that SCCs are now called fundamental structures.

Number 133 under “The Church as the Presence of Christ:” “This is clearly seen in the universal Church, in dioceses and parishes, in the SCCs, in movements and associations, and even in the Christian family itself, which is ‘called to be a ‘domestic church’, a place of faith, of prayer and of loving concern for the true and enduring good of each of its members,” a community which lives the sign of peace. Together with the parish, the SCCs and the movements and associations can be helpful places for accepting and living the gift of reconciliation offered by Christ our peace. Each member of the community must become a ‘guardian and host’ to the other: this is the meaning of the sign of peace in the celebration of the Eucharist.”

COMMENTARY: SCCs are places to live Christ’s gift of reconciliation and peace. SCC members exchange a sign of Christ’s peace with each other and with others in the spirit of solidarity, unity and commitment/responsibility to each other.

Number 151 under “The Sacred Scriptures:” “Each member of Christ’s faithful should grow accustomed to reading the Bible daily! An attentive reading of the recent Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini* ([http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_exh\\_20100930\\_verbum-domini\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_ben-xvi_exh_20100930_verbum-domini_en.html)) can provide some useful pastoral indications. Care should be taken to initiate the faithful into the ancient and fruitful tradition of *Lectio Divina*. The Word of God can lead to the knowledge of Jesus Christ and bring about conversions which produce reconciliation, since it is able to sift “the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (*Hebrews* 4:12). The Synod Fathers encouraged Christian parish communities, SCCs, families and associations and ecclesial movements to set aside times for sharing the Word of God. In this way, they will increasingly become places where God’s word, which builds up the community of Christ’s disciples, is read, meditated on and celebrated. This word constantly enlivens fraternal communion (cf. *1 Peter* 1:22-25).”

COMMENTARY: This confirms the central place of *Bible* sharing and *Bible* reflection in the life of SCCs in Africa.

Number 169 under “Missionaries in the Footsteps of Christ:” In the context of the new evangelization “all Christians are admonished to be reconciled to God. In this way you will become agents of reconciliation within the ecclesial and social communities in which you live and work.”

COMMENTARY: This echoes many synod documents that encourage SCC members to become agents of reconciliation in their own faith communities on the local, grassroots level, in their natural, human communities and in the wider society. The last 10 years has seen the increasing involvement of SCCs in promoting forgiveness, healing, reconciliation, justice and peace in Africa. There is considerable documentation on how some of the 20,000 base communities (another name for SCCs) were involved in the reconciliation and healing ministry in Rwanda after the 2004 genocide. Research in Kenya, Rwanda and Sudan indicates that women are better in peacemaking than men. Men tend to emphasize power and control while women emphasize personal relationships. The Jesuit Centre for

Theological Reflection (JCTR) in Lusaka, Zambia produced guided reflection pamphlets on justice and peace topics for SCCs to generate faith-based action. The various reflection methods in the Lumko Program especially related to social justice are used throughout Africa.

There is an ongoing emphasis on formation and training. Lumko Workshops are regularly held throughout Africa. A workshop on “The Role of SCCs in Civic Education in DRC” took place in Congo in Kinshasa in 2008. The annual Kenya Lenten Campaign trains SCC Leaders to use the inductive „see,’ “judge” and “act“ process of the Pastoral Circle and to facilitate “Training of Trainers” (TOT) Workshops on justice and peace in parishes and SCCs. Hopefully the Biblical Centre for Africa and Madagascar, commonly known as BICAM, that is located at the SECAM Secretariat in Accra, Ghana can promote more training programs in bible reflection.

Research shows that a statistical and analytical evaluation of SCCs in Africa is better done on a diocese to diocese basis, and even on a parish by parish basis, rather than on a country to country basis. Presently there are 110,000 SCCs in the nine AMECEA countries. Kenya alone has over 40,000 SCCs. They are pastorally oriented and mainly parish-based. Some dioceses in Nigeria have active SCCs. In other dioceses they are non-existent. SCCs seem to regularly rise and fall. SCCs started in Lagos, Nigeria Archdiocese of Lagos in 1977. However by late 1980s the SCCs nosedived. In 1992 SCCs became alive again. Now there are SCCs in 50 parishes in the archdiocese. SCCs are very strong in DRC. 2006 statistics indicated that Kinshasa Archdiocese had 1,800 CEVBs in the city with many more in the surrounding rural areas. There are many SCCs in Southern Africa especially South Africa and Zimbabwe. IMBISA (Inter-Regional Meeting of the Bishops of Southern Africa) conferences and workshops are an important catalyst. The small communities of Sant’Egidio in Mozambique provide another model of SCCs.

In terms of using the internet to promote SCCs in Africa “the future is now.” Today we have the growing importance of networking, the internet and the new media/social media: interactive websites specifically about SCCs in Africa, online journals, online learning sites, conferencing, webinars, search engines like Google, social networking sites like Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube and Skype, podcasts,

video clips, DVDs, special applications (called “apps”), e-readers, Quick Response (QR) Readers, plug-ins, blogs, list-servs, forums, email messages, cellphones (especially Smart Phones), other mobile devices, text messages, etc. The social media revolution is changing the way the world – and the Catholic Church in Africa – communicates.

In this digital age we can dramatically expand our knowledge and understanding on three levels. First, the internet and the new media/social media can help in the formation and training of SCC leaders/animators/facilitators/coordinators in Africa. Second, the internet and the new media/social media can help members of SCCs in Africa to share their experience with the rest of the world. Through the internet and other forms of this new information technology and digital world, members of African SCCs can also feel part of the Global Church, the World Church. Third, the internet and the new media/social media can help people around the world learn about SCCs in Africa.

A concrete example is the Small Christian Communities Global Collaborative Website ([www.smallchristiancommunities.org](http://www.smallchristiancommunities.org)) that shares SCCs contacts, information, events, materials and news for each of the six continents. The Africa Continent Section includes a lot of continent-wide material and specific national material from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Kenya, Malawi, South Africa and Tanzania so far. Other features on the website are: Archives, Book Reviews, Calendar of Events, eBooks, Links to other SCCs Websites, Photo Gallery, Resources, SCC Polls, SCCs Stories Database, Search Engine, Videos, Vision and What’s New.

What is the future? Many African SCCs have emerged from reading the contemporary signs of the times in Africa and responding to today’s reality. Cardinal Polycarp Pengo of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, and the President of SECAM, calls SCCs “a special or privileged instrument of evangelization.” Tanzanian theologian Laurenti Magesa emphasizes: “For the future of Christian mission, specifically in Africa, we can say without hesitation that the development of small faith communities is an indispensable requirement.” They can play a major role in the New Evangelization. Already as a new way of being church and a new model of church (closely related to the Church as Family and the Communion of Communities Models of Church) African SCCs are influencing the World Church. SCCs in Africa will

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continue to develop in the spirit of the Spanish proverb popular with the Base or Basic Christian Communities in Latin America: *We create the path by walking.*



## A Spark Ignites a Flame – Small Christian Communities in Germany

Klaus Vellguth

After the Second Vatican Council, Europe witnessed the emergence of a movement inspired primarily by the search in Latin American countries for ways of living as a committed Christian. From the 1970s onwards Christians began to form Basic Ecclesial Communities in response to this movement. A look at their evolution in the different European countries makes it clear that the momentum generated by the movement varied from country to country. The development of Basic Ecclesial Communities in Germany at this time was of only marginal significance compared to other European countries. Looking back, Norbert Mette writes: “In comparison with other countries in Europe [the development of Basic Ecclesial Communities] in Germany was on a modest scale. In fact, Basic Ecclesial Communities were formed relatively late. A considerable influence on the situation in Germany was exerted by the changes taking place at the time in the Catholic Church in the Netherlands [...].”<sup>308</sup> A look at the book *Die andere Kirche: Basisgemeinden in Europa*<sup>309</sup>, published in 1982, is revealing in this respect. It contains reports on the development of Basic Ecclesial Communities in the Netherlands, Belgium, France, Italy, Spain, Portugal, Poland and Hungary. There is no separate report in this European survey on grass-roots developments in the Church in Germany, however. The book merely reviews the situation in the German-speaking countries at the end of the national reports.

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<sup>308</sup> Mette, N., Der europäische Kontext (Lecture given at the conference “In the Modern World? The Church on the way through History in Basic Ecclesial Communities.” International Consultations in Aachen, 14-16 December 2010.

<sup>309</sup> Copray, N. / Meesmann, H., / Seiterich, Th. (ed.), *Die andere Kirche, Basisgemeinden in Europa*, Wuppertal 1982.

In his article on the situation of Basic Ecclesial Communities in Germany Thomas Seiterich proposes the following as a definition of what a Basic Ecclesial Community is considered to be in Germany: "Groups and communities are being formed that exist outside the institutional parish structures and beyond the scope of ecclesiastical law. These groups and communities call themselves 'Basic Groups' or 'Basic Ecclesial Communities'. They read the Bible, celebrate Communion or the Eucharist, intervene in political conflicts and make their views heard with an increasing degree of self-confidence among the Church-going public."<sup>310</sup> These groups called themselves Projektgruppe konkrete Theologie (Lauffen), Laurentius-Konvent (Wethen), Oskar-Romero-Haus (Bonn), Teestubengemeinde (Würzburg), Gastkirche (Recklinghausen), KABA (Hannover), Dessauerhausgemeinde (Frankfurt am Main) or simply Basisgemeinde (Darmstadt, Marburg, Bonn, Wulfshagenerhütten, etc.). Since these groups tended to regard themselves as part of a reform movement or a changed practice and not as a substructure within the Church, Hermann Steinkamp favoured treating the Basic Ecclesial Communities not as a 'social form' but as a 'practice form'<sup>311</sup>. He warned against the expectation that Basic Ecclesial Communities could be transplanted as "living cells into the ageing organism of the European people's church"<sup>312</sup>, considering it to be unrealistic.

During the Grassroots Catholics Day in 1980 a map was put up on which Basic Ecclesial Communities could be entered. A total of 40 groups or communities were identified. Writing about the members of these Basic Ecclesial Communities, Thomas Seiterich said they were generally between the ages of 18 and 60 and that marginal social groups were barely represented. The members "come from that section of the population in which the younger and middle generation has, with the exception of a small minority, turned its back in

<sup>310</sup> Seiterich, Th., Basisgemeinden, in: Copray, N., / Meesmann, H / Seiterich, Th. (ed.), o. cit., 135-148, 135.

<sup>311</sup> Cf. Steinkamp, H., Selbst wenn die Betreuten sich ändern, Theologie im Ringen um Geschichte und Gesellschaft, in: Schillebeeckx, E., *Mystik und Politik*, Johann Baptist Metz zu Ehren, Mainz 1988, 354-363, 355.

<sup>312</sup> Steinkamp, H., Prozesse der Gemeindebildung, Exemplarische Schwierigkeiten in der Bundesrepublik, in: Metz, J.B. / Rottländer, P. (ed.), *Lateinamerika und Europa*, Mainz 1988, 110.

disappointment on the churches over the past twenty years.”<sup>313</sup> These Basic Ecclesial Communities in the Federal Republic of Germany regarded themselves initially as personal communities, membership of which rested on a conscious decision in favour of a Christian life involving greater personal commitment. Their high level of binding personal commitment was also manifested in the vehement resistance of the Basic Ecclesial Communities to the pastoral practice of a ‘Church of dependents’ or a ‘service Church’. Instead, the members of the Basic Ecclesial Communities generally attached importance to political involvement. Many of their members played an active role in the political disputes over the NATO double-track missiles decision, the nuclear power plant at Brokdorf and the plans to build the western runway at Frankfurt Airport.

In addition to the political slant that characterised many of the Basic Ecclesial Communities they adopted a new approach to the Bible: “Small groups get together in an effort to interpret the Word of God, who topples the mighty from their thrones and lifts up the downtrodden, in their own specific occupational, family and political settings. [...] Basic Ecclesial Communities endeavour to jointly re-appropriate the Word of God; and in these difficult attempts at re-appropriation, which in many cases are hindered by the middle-class practice of steering clear of unfamiliar developments, the members experience what they regard as a key element of living and working together in a Basic Ecclesial Community.”<sup>314</sup>

Many Basic Ecclesial Communities consciously saw themselves as a living part of a universal Church and maintained direct, personal relations with parishes or Basic Ecclesial Communities in countries of the southern hemisphere. In addition to their universal Church aspirations these Basic Ecclesial Communities asserted the right to ecumenical openness, which manifested itself in the accessibility of the Basic Ecclesial Communities to members of different denominations. The Basic Ecclesial Communities which emerged in Germany at this stage regarded themselves either as groupings on

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<sup>313</sup> Seiterich, Th., *Basisgemeinden*, o. cit., 138.

<sup>314</sup> *Ibid.* 143. Cf. Metz, J.P., *Im Aufbruch zu einer kulturellen polyzentrischen Welt*, in: Kaufmann, F.-X./ Metz, J.B., *Zukunftsfähigkeit, Suchbewegungen im Christentum*, Freiburg 1987, 110-111.

the fringes of the institutional (Catholic) Church, as non-denominational groupings or, in some cases, as groups that deliberately wished to form a contrast with the 'established Church.' The governing body of the Church reacted in different ways to these new developments. There were numerous constructive attempts to commend the Basic Ecclesial Communities as an innovative movement of awakening propelled by dedicated Christians who offered considerable potential for the renewal of the Church as a whole. The last Lent Pastoral Letter written in 1981 by the then Bishop of Limburg, Wilhelm Kempf, contained welcome words of respect for the nascent Basic Ecclesial Communities: "There are Christians who feel called upon to give more than what they currently experience in their parishes in terms of commitment and dedication. However, they also take the message of the Bible seriously that you cannot be a Christian all on your own. They feel that now, more than ever before, it is inconceivable to be a Christian and not be part of a community. They, therefore, gather in small groups and strive to find common ways of living that are in harmony with the Gospel and the following of Jesus Christ. They hold discussions on the faith and the Bible, celebrate Mass together, donate a large part of their earnings to the poor and the persecuted in the Third World, stand up for the defenceless and in some cases also take political sides. Most of these groups have not been founded by a priest. They have been formed by lay people acting on their own free will. [...] They aim to give a new, more vocal expression to the radical demands made in the Gospel of mediocre or introverted Christians. They suffer if the parish does not give them sufficient room to pursue their own initiatives. They criticise the fact that Christians, and often enough the clergy too, are insensitive to social and political problems. They are disgusted by the new 'look after and care for me' mentality that is to be found among many members of the Catholic Church."<sup>315</sup> It was thanks to such words of esteem that many Christians active in the Basic Ecclesial Communities continued to regard themselves as part of the Church and decided not to break off contacts with other Church circles, which had often become very fragile.

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<sup>315</sup> Kempf, W., Für euch und für alle, Brief des Bischofs von Limburg zur Fastenzeit 1981 an die Gemeinden des Bistums, besonders an die Fernstehenden, Limburg 1981.

In the 1980s and 1990s many Basic Ecclesial Communities in Germany revealed a high level of commitment, although the movement itself never gained the momentum it achieved in some other European countries.<sup>316</sup> In fact, most of the Basic Ecclesial Communities disbanded after a few years. There were many reasons for this. The dissolution process was attributed in part to personal conflicts within the groups, which have a substantial explosive force in personal communities. On the other hand, many Basic Ecclesial Communities failed to live up to the high ethical expectations they set themselves. Finally, the late 1980s and early 1990s saw the end of the political disputes that had served as a source of identity for many Basic Ecclesial Communities. The end of the political arguments meant the loss of an important point of focus and identification for the Basic Ecclesial Communities. Another problem was that the approach adopted by the Basic Ecclesial Communities came about “because of the upheavals in Germany, out of a sense of frustration and with an idealising look at ‘the others’”<sup>317</sup>. Moreover, from the 1990s at the latest Germany underwent a phase of social cocooning that was less conducive to the political involvement experienced the late 1970s and early 1980s, favouring a return to familiar structures instead.<sup>318</sup> The new grassroots movement emerging in German local churches today can be attributed to a later development.

### **New learning experiences in Africa and Asia**

The start of the third millennium has witnessed the emergence of a new Basic Ecclesial Community movement in Germany.<sup>319</sup> There are two reasons for this. Firstly, the disadvantages of the territorially ever larger pastoral units in the German dioceses are readily apparent. Secondly, the spiritual and community-based approach of the Small Christian Communities, as seen from the universal Church perspective, is regarded as having the potential to serve as a social form

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<sup>316</sup> Cf. Höhne-Sparborth, J., Länderbericht „Niederlande“, in: Copray, N. / Meesmann, H. / Seiterich, Th., (ed.), o. cit., Wuppertal 1982, 37- 49.

<sup>317</sup> Cf. Lutz, B., Small Christian Communities – ein weltweites, aber sehr heterogenes Phänomen, in: Pastoraltheologische Informationen 26 (2006) 1, 22-37, 23.

<sup>318</sup> Cf. Horx, M., Trendbuch 1, Berlin 1996.

<sup>319</sup> Cf. Lutz, B., o. cit. 22-37.

for the Church at the local level.<sup>320</sup> The experience gained in earlier decades during the initial phase of the Basic Ecclesial Communities, which ultimately lacked long-term viability, has been analysed and the lessons learned from the lack of acceptance, attachment to the Church and spirituality witnessed during that early period.<sup>321</sup>

Small Christian Communities, which emerged from the mid-1970s firstly in East Africa, then in southern Africa and finally in Asia, have proved to be an important source of learning for the universal Church.<sup>322</sup> From the 1980s onwards, *missio* monitored the processes of awakening in Basic Ecclesial Communities in the churches of the South, which were regarded initially as places where there was a lively biblical apostolate. In its project work *missio* gave special support to publication of the Lumko materials<sup>323</sup>, which encompassed both the Bible-sharing method and the Small Christian Communities approach.<sup>324</sup> In the 1980s, *missio* published a workbook introducing the Seven Steps method of Bible sharing in Germany, where this form of biblical apostolate found numerous supporters.<sup>325</sup> In contrast to the papers that were very often presented in Bible study groups, the newly introduced Bible sharing method rested on a different approach. “Whereas Bible study groups and Bible methods very often – and justifiably – rely on the superior skills of the person leading the group

<sup>320</sup> Cf. Körber, M., Sehnsuchtsorte, Small Christian Communities, in: Pastoralblatt 59 (2007) 81-85.

<sup>321</sup> Cf. Weber, F., Gewagte Inkulturation, Basisgemeinden in Brasilien, Eine pastoralgeschichtliche Zwischenbilanz, Mainz 1995, 38-65.

<sup>322</sup> Cf. Vellguth, K., Eine neue Art Kirche zu sein, Entstehung und Verbreitung der Small Christian Communities und des Bibel-Teilens in Afrika und Asien, Freiburg 2005.

<sup>323</sup> Cf. Lobinger, F., Building Small Christian Communities, No. 19 in the series “Training for Community Ministries”, Lady Frere 1981. Hirmer, O. / Broderick, R., Neighbourhood Gospel Sharing, No. 20 in the series “Training for Community Ministries”, Lady Frere 1985. The first edition of this publication was entitled “Neighbourhood Gospel Groups”. The title chosen for the new, revised edition in 1985 was “Gospel Sharing”. The second revised edition published in 1991 was called “The Pastoral Use of the Bible”. The title has remained unchanged since then.

<sup>324</sup> Cf. Tewes, D., AsIPA – Small Christian Communities, Ein weltkirchliches Lernprojekt für die Pastoral im deutschsprachigen Raum, in: Ordenskorrespondenz 48 (2007) 1, 62–69, 63f.

<sup>325</sup> Cf. Rappel, S., Eine neue Art, Kirche zu sein, Pastoral aus Afrika und Asien – eine Inspiration für Deutschland?, in: Anzeiger für die Seelsorge 115 (2006) 9, 5-8, 6f.

[...], the point of Bible sharing is to experience the practical updating and full expression of the truth of the Council, which stems from the fundamental equality and dignity of all who have been baptised – a dignity which can also be interpreted as meaning that all are called upon equally to listen to God's Word.”<sup>326</sup>

In 1989, the last Diocesan Synod in Germany, which was held in the Diocese of Hildesheim, addressed the issue of “A New Way of Being Church”.<sup>327</sup> One of the main things the Synod Fathers learned at that time was that meetings and working groups were not just technically and bureaucratically efficient ways of working, but also “a self-realization of the Church and self-evangelisation. Bible-sharing proved to be a practical way of appreciating what God wants for the Church today.”<sup>328</sup> In the 1990s, *missio* invited Oswald Hirmer to give seminars on Bible-sharing in Germany. In doing so, it drew on the experience that had been gathered in the Small Christian Communities in Africa.<sup>329</sup> In both the Diocese of Hildesheim and, in particular, in the Diocese of Rottenburg-Stuttgart an awareness had developed at an early stage that a process of Bible-based community development was taking place in the Small Christian Communities.<sup>330</sup> In the meantime the first Asian Integral Pastoral Approach (AsIPA) texts were available in a German translation supplied by Oswald Hirmer. In 1998, a workbook on Bible-sharing was published in a new, completely revised edition.<sup>331</sup> In Germany, reception initially concen-

<sup>326</sup> Hennecke, C., Mehr und anders als man denkt: Small Christian Communities, in: idem. (ed.), *Small Christian Communities verstehen, Ein Weg, Kirche mit den Menschen zu sein*, Würzburg 2009, 10-28, 21. Alexander Foitzik, *Neue Formen gemeindlichen Lebens, Ein Gespräch mit Regens Christian Hennecke über Kirchenbilder*, in: *Herder Korrespondenz* 64 (2010) 4, 177-181, 180.

<sup>327</sup> Cf. Leder, G., *Auf neue Art Kirche sein ...? Laienhafte Anmerkungen*, Münster 2008.

<sup>328</sup> Kaune, M., / Hennecke, C., Mehr als Bibel-Teilen, Auf dem Weg zu einer “Kirche in der Nachbarschaft” im Bistum Hildesheim, in: *Anzeiger für die Seelsorge* 115 (2006) 9, 16-19, 16.

<sup>329</sup> Cf. Nagler, N., *Spiritualität und Gemeindebildung – eine neue Art Kirche zu sein*, in: *Lebendige Seelsorge* 56 (2005) 4, 211-218, 211f.

<sup>330</sup> Cf. Diözese Rottenburg-Stuttgart, *Der Samen ist das Wort Gottes, Bausteine für eine biblisch orientierte Gemeindeentwicklung (Materialhilfe 11 des Instituts für Fort- und Weiterbildung der kirchlichen Dienste in der Diözese Rottenburg-Stuttgart)*, Rottenburg 1998.

<sup>331</sup> *missio* (ed.), *Bibel-Teilen, Bekannte Texte neu erleben*, Aachen 1998.

trated on the Seven Steps of bible-sharing as a form of Bible study.<sup>332</sup> The strong focus on the biblical apostolate also found expression in the book *Gemeinschaft im Wort* published in 1999. It presents Bible-sharing primarily as a form of spiritual Bible reading in which no account is taken of the ecclesiological context.<sup>333</sup> But Bible-sharing is more than just that: "In actual fact, Bible-sharing is the spiritual foundation of the Small Christian Communities. Where Bible-sharing is conducted properly, it turns a Small Christian Community into a 'mystagogical community', whose members help each other to grasp the secret of Christ's presence in their midst."<sup>334</sup>

The introduction of Bible-sharing in Germany paved the way for a new, nationwide initiative that enabled Small Christian Communities to be launched in Germany at the outset of the third millennium. This initiative ultimately had its origins in the journeys undertaken by two *missio* members of staff to Sri Lanka and India respectively in preparation for the *missio* campaign on World Mission Sunday in 2000. In the summer of 1999 Dieter Tewes travelled to India and Klaus Vellguth to Sri Lanka. In the course of these journeys it turned out that not only was a form of Bible-sharing practised in the Small Christian Communities that was of interest to Germany, but also that in the Small Christian Communities in Sri Lanka and India, which had been set up in Asia as part of the Asian Integral Pastoral Approach (AsIPA), there was an intrinsic ecclesiological potential that changes churches in the spirit of the Second Vatican Council and leads to a new way of being Church.<sup>335</sup> It became clear that this pastoral approach offered interesting prospects for Germany in shaping the Church at

<sup>332</sup> Cf. Kaune, M./ Hennecke, C., Mehr als Bibel-Teilen, Auf dem Weg zu einer 'Kirche in der Nachbarschaft' im Bistum Hildesheim, in: AnzSS 115 (2006) 9, 16-19, 17. Vellguth, K., *Gemeinschaft im Wort*. Das Bibel-Teilen erschließt Christen auf der ganzen Welt neue Wege zum Glauben, in: *Im Blickpunkt*, Munich 2004, 10-12.

<sup>333</sup> Cf. Hirmer, O./ Steins, G., *Gemeinschaft im Wort*, Werkbuch zum Bibel-Teilen, Munich 1999.

<sup>334</sup> Hirmer, O., Small Christian Communities, Ein starkes Werkzeug zur inneren Reform der Kirche, in: *Anzeiger für die Seelsorge* 115 (2006) 9, 20-21, 21.

<sup>335</sup> Cf. FABC, *Journeying Together Towards the Third Millennium*, The Final Statement of the Fifth Plenary Assembly of FABC, Bandung, Indonesia, July 17-27, 1990, in: *FABC Papers* (1990) 55-59, 57d, 26f. Cf. Vianney, E., Our Vision of Communion and Solidarity in the Context of Asia, in: *Colloquium on Churches in Asia in the 21st Century*, Manila 1998.

the local level.<sup>336</sup> An application to present this approach in Germany stated the following: “The AsIPA programme [...] addresses the pastoral and spiritual needs in the communities and forms viable basic ecclesial structures. The pastoral strength of the AsIPA approach resides in the dovetailing of spirituality and community building; it convincingly implements the communion ecclesiology. The different cultural context notwithstanding, this concept also offers a vision for local churches in Germany.”<sup>337</sup> Norbert Mette subsequently wrote the following about this method of drawing attention to the experience of Small Christian Communities in Asia and implementing a learning community in the universal Church: “A look at other regions within the universal Church can give cause for hope and provide confirmation that there are other ways of proceeding.”<sup>338</sup>

### **Launching the Spirituality and Community Building project**

Missio decided to introduce the pastoral approach of the Small Christian Communities to audiences in Germany as part of a multi-year project. In September 2000, the newly established Working Group on Spirituality and Community Building, headed by Norbert Nagler, met in Aachen to map out the prospects for such a project.<sup>339</sup> Once again it became clear that the strength of the AsIPA approach derives from the fact that full-time pastoral staff, in particular, learn a new, participatory style of leadership and lay people are invited to share responsibility. Emphasis was also put on the spiritual and pastoral opportunities this approach had to offer for the Church in Germany: “For the German dioceses and parishes, which in the present circumstances

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<sup>336</sup> Cf. Vellguth, K., Am Anfang steht die Vision, in: Fürstenberg, G. von/ Nagler, N. / Vellguth, K. (ed.), *Zukunftsfähige Gemeinde, Ein Werkbuch mit Impulsen aus den Jungen Kirchen*, Munich 2003, 60-64. Vellguth, K., Die Sonne geht im Osten auf, in: *Pastoralblatt* 54 (2002) 10, 251-254. Tewes, D., o. cit., 64.

<sup>337</sup> Vellguth, K., Antrag zur Etablierung eines Projekts „Small Christian Communities“ (unpublished document), Aachen 1999.

<sup>338</sup> Mette, N., Situation der Gemeindepastoral in Deutschland, in: Fürstenberg, G. von / Nagler, N. / Vellguth, K. (ed.), o. cit. 12.

<sup>339</sup> In 2000 the members of the Working Group on Spirituality and Community Building were Gabriele Eichelmann, Werner Meyer zum Farwig, Helmut Gammel, Max Himmel, Rainer Kiwitz, Annette Meuthrath, Hadwig Müller, Norbert Nagler (as project leader), Werner Schmitz, Harald Strotmann and Dieter Tewes (who later took over as project leader).

are seeking pastoral prospects for the future, AsIPA offers a special opportunity to counter the threat of exclusively structural thinking by supporting the congregations in their search for a sound spiritual basis and accompanying them effectively down this road.”<sup>340</sup>

To learn more about the development of Small Christian Communities in Asia two *missio* representatives, Armin Ehl and Norbert Nagler, took part in the Second AsIPA General Assembly in October 2000 in Sam Phran (Thailand). During this conference Oswald Hirmer stressed that Small Christian Communities focus on Christ and made it clear that the practice of Gospel-sharing is just one way of placing Christ at the heart of the community or the Church.<sup>341</sup> This line of argument was taken up shortly afterwards by Ottmar Fuchs, who wrote the following about the connection between a focus on the Bible and a focus on Christ: “References to the Bible and references to Christ belong together in these communities. First of all, Christ is positioned at the centre. He is given a presence so that he can be experienced as the person who speaks to the faithful through the biblical texts. The faithful regard their own interpretations of the texts as an answer to this word. There is no discussion of the texts; instead they become the medium for the encounter with Christ.”<sup>342</sup>

### **A journey with consequences**

A few weeks after this AsIPA General Assembly a second meeting of the Working Group on Spirituality and Community Building was held in December 2000. Representatives of the dioceses in Aachen, Osnabrück, Rottenburg and Trier reported on the pastoral situation in their respective dioceses and identified points of departure for a grassroots model of Small Church Communities.<sup>343</sup> One of the key

<sup>340</sup> Working Group on Spirituality and Community Building, minutes of the meeting of 14 September 2000 (unpublished minutes), Aachen 2000.

<sup>341</sup> Cf. Hirmer, O., AsIPA, A Tool for Implementing Our Vision of Church as a Co-Responsible Community of Brothers and Sisters, in: AsIPA General Assembly II, A New Way of Being Church in the New Millennium, Taipei 2002, 26-31. Cf. Nagler, N., Meditation in Gemeinschaft, Bibel- und Leben-Teilen als Gemeinde am Ort, in: *Anzeiger für die Seelsorge* 114 (2004) 7/8, 18-23.

<sup>342</sup> Fuchs, O., Immer noch: Neue Impulse aus der Weltkirche, in: Fürstenberg, G. von / Nagler, N. / Vellguth, K. (ed.), o. cit. 17-27, 25.

<sup>343</sup> For related aspects concerning a contextualisation in Europe cf. Spielberg, B., Wo lebt

steps agreed was that in the following year pastoral staff should be offered the opportunity to travel to India and Sri Lanka so that they could observe the Small Christian Communities approach in practice. The journey was undertaken in March 2001 with participants from the (arch)dioceses of Aachen, Hamburg, Osnabrück, Trier and Rottenburg-Stuttgart.<sup>344</sup> The participants were invited “to put day-to-day business to the back of their minds and join with partners from the universal Church in a discussion and exchange of experience in order to jointly develop models appropriate to the circumstances in the respective local churches”. The following practical project objectives were formulated: “To experience the Church as a Universal Church Learning Community under the overall heading of The Future Viability of Parishes the World Over; on the basis of the AsIPA programme to find out about the development of a thriving and sustainable community spirituality; to learn from the pastoral changes in the Church in Asia and derive momentum from these for the pastoral concepts of the respective dioceses in Germany.”<sup>345</sup> The journey initially took the group to an introductory seminar in the Indian city of Hyderabad, after which the members split up and visited various dioceses in India (Mumbai, Nagpur) and Sri Lanka (Negombo, Kandy). The group subsequently met up again in the Indian city of Nagpur, reflected on the experience gathered in the various dioceses and agreed on ways in which the outcomes of the journey could be incorporated in pastoral discussions in the dioceses in Germany. After returning home, Werner Meyer zum Farwig had the following to say about the pastoral approach experienced in Asia and its applicability to the Church in Germany: “The Small Christian Communities offer the experience of a special spirituality. It is based on the Word of God, the communion in Christ and a common responsibility to look after each other. [...] We would need to inculturate AsIPA into the European cultural environment. That is the challenge we face. As our hosts frequently pointed out, this can only be done step by step and with a great deal of patience.”<sup>346</sup>

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die Kirche? Antworten aus Asien auf eine drängende Frage, in: *Lebendige Seelsorge* 56 (2005) 4, 235-240, 240.

<sup>344</sup> Cf. Rappel, S., o. cit., 7f.

<sup>345</sup> Norbert, N., o. cit. 212f.

<sup>346</sup> Nagler, N./ Meyer zum Farwig, W., ... Auf eine neue Weise Kirche sein, in: Fürstenberg, G. von / Nagler, N. / Vellguth, K. (ed.), o. cit., 130f.

Although no precise ‘roadmap’ was available for the introduction of Small Christian Communities in Germany, a decision was taken to adopt a bold approach and “simply make a start. ‘Just do it’ were the encouraging words that were heard time and again from Africa, Asia and Latin America. The most important steps are learning by doing, experimenting, continuous reflection, exchange, networking, information and lobbying.”<sup>347</sup> Looking back, Dieter Tewes recalls the process of implementing this pastoral programme in German local churches, which now got under way: “We adopted an ‘error-friendly learning’ approach in which we looked at the repeated experiences of local churches in recent years, analysed them and examined them for their contextualisation potential.”<sup>348</sup> The strengths of the AsIPA approach were deemed to be the focus on community, the provision of a home for Christians seeking spirituality in the Church, the independence of full-time ‘Church managers’, the link between pastoral work and social welfare work, the empowering of lay people and the ecclesiological character of the approach<sup>349</sup>: “During Bible-sharing there is not just talk about the Church, but it also manifests itself, because people feel called out of their isolation by the Word of God and out of their service to their respective idols and they hear the message of salvation from the Good Father in Heaven who knows what we need and who has long provided for us (cf. Matthew 6).”<sup>350</sup>

The Spirituality and Community Building initiative launched by *missio* fell on fertile soil in a number of dioceses. During a Diocesan Day in Aachen, for example, it was noted that “The Diocese of Aachen encourages the establishment, support and development of groups which, motivated by biblical spirituality (Bible-sharing, living Gospel), support each other as faith and life communities and encourage activities.”<sup>351</sup> This resolution had been preceded by several

<sup>347</sup> Rappel, S., o. cit. 8.

<sup>348</sup> Dieter Tewes discussion on 30 May 2012.

<sup>349</sup> Cf. Working Group on Spirituality and Community Building, minutes of 6/7 November 2001 (unpublished document), Aachen 2001.

<sup>350</sup> Steins, G., *Die ekklesiogene Dimension des Bibel-Teilens*, in: Fürstenberg, G. von / Nagler, N./ Vellguth, K. (ed.), o. cit. 67.

<sup>351</sup> Bistum Aachen, Bistumstag 2001 im Bistum Aachen, Handlungsoptionen zu den Leitlinien (Beschlüsse zur Weiterführung des geregelten Dialogs), Aachen 2002.

courses given by Fritz Lobinger and Oswald Hirmer in Aachen.<sup>352</sup> In 2001, the (arch)dioceses in Hamburg, Freiburg, Osnabrück, Rottenburg-Stuttgart and Trier succeeded in projecting the experience of the universal Church into the diocesan context.<sup>353</sup> The same year representatives of the Archdiocese of Freiburg joined in the Spirituality and Community Building project. By that time other dioceses had begun to take notice of this promising pastoral initiative. The heads of the German Pastoral Care Offices invited Norbert Nagler, who was head of the working group at that time, to present the Spirituality and Community Building project at their conference in Goslar in December 2001.<sup>354</sup>

### Interest grows

In 2002, *missio* again invited Oswald Hirmer and Fritz Lobinger to give seminars in various dioceses in Germany on the subject of Small Christian Communities. Thomas Vijay and Agnes Chawadi, two representatives of local churches in India, were also recruited to report at the beginning of the year on their experiences with Basic Ecclesial Community structures in Asia.<sup>355</sup> In addition to the seminars and workshops in Germany two journeys to Asia were undertaken in 2002 by pastoral staff from the dioceses of Aachen<sup>356</sup> and Hamburg<sup>357</sup>. These journeys, together with the universal Church experiences gathered in the course of such a voyage, had a catalytic effect. After the return of the Hamburg travel group, fifty enquiries about events, information, etc. concerning the Asian approach to pastoral work were submitted to the *missio* diocesan contact point.<sup>358</sup>

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<sup>352</sup> Further seminars with Oswald Hirmer were held in the dioceses of Trier and Erfurt in 2001.

<sup>353</sup> Cf. Working Group on Spirituality and Community Building, minutes of the 6th working meeting (unpublished document), Aachen 2001.

<sup>354</sup> Cf. Nagler, N., o. cit. 215.

<sup>355</sup> Cf. *ibid.*

<sup>356</sup> The AsIPA journey to India and Sri Lanka undertaken by the Diocese of Aachen, which was headed by Werner Meyer zum Farwig, lasted from 18 January to 8 February 2002.

<sup>357</sup> The journey to India undertaken by pastoral staff of the Archdiocese of Hamburg headed by Guido Brune lasted from 14 to 29 September 2002. Cf. Nagler, N., o. cit., 215.

<sup>358</sup> Cf. Working Group on Spirituality and Community Building, minutes of the meeting of 3 December 2003 (unpublished document), Aachen 2003.

Moreover, the members of the Working Group on Spirituality and Community Building were repeatedly asked to report on their experiences to interested people in Germany. In March 2002, Dieter Tewes talked about his AsIPA experience at an in-house conference of the Pastoral Care Office in the Diocese of Osnabrück and combined the approach of the Small Christian Communities with a five-week training course for pastoral assistants in celebrations of the Word of God in the diocese. 2002 also saw the setting up of a cross-departmental project group called Spirituality and Community Building – Small Christian Communities. Its task was to build up Small Christian Communities in the parish associations and so gather experience with this dedicated form of being Church at the local level.<sup>359</sup> In Rottenburg-Stuttgart the linking of spirituality with the building of communities was discussed at numerous meetings of the Ordinariate. Max Himmel, who was active in community development in the Diocese of Rottenburg-Stuttgart, began passing on the experience gained in Asia to the community renewal animators on the basis of the Rottenburg model. In the Diocese of Trier the issue of spirituality and community building was dealt with at the meeting of deans in January 2002.

### **Bible sharing is more than Bible study even in the Year of the Bible**

The Year of the Bible was held in Germany in 2003. In the run-up, numerous members of the Working Group on Spirituality and Community Building were asked to hold meetings on Bible-sharing to mark the Year of the Bible. This enabled individual aspects to be addressed in the dioceses of Essen, Hamburg, Osnabrück and Trier. The plan in the Diocese of Osnabrück was to announce Bible-sharing in many groups in a parish and to train leaders for these groups. After an intensive period lasting several weeks the aim was that as many as possible of the existing groups and circles, together with groups specially trained for the purpose, should meet once a week or once a fortnight to engage in Bible-sharing. Dieter Tewes wrote of this project: “The intensive period was intended to function as a

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<sup>359</sup> Cf. Tewes, D., Kirche in der Nachbarschaft, Von AsIPA zu Small Christian Communities in Deutschland – Erfahrungen im Bistum Osnabrück, in: *Lebendige Seelsorge* 56 (2005) 4, 228-234, 230.

‘spiritual renewal of the parish’. The project group combined the intensive period with the hope that groups would continue to meet if their experience of Bible-sharing proved to be positive and that they would thus gradually develop into Small Christian Communities.”<sup>360</sup> However, it turned out that longer preparation was needed for such an intensive period. This meant that the latter could not be carried out in the Year of the Bible in 2003. The efforts undertaken bore initial fruit in 2004, however, when the first parish associations began work on the programme in the Diocese of Osnabrück. It turned out that the initiative led to the strengthening of Bible study groups rather than to the building of Small Christian Communities. “It is apparently very difficult to convey the inner connection between Bible-sharing and sharing services in the parish.”<sup>361</sup> The members of these groups were less interested in the building of a community or church. The emphasis was very much on Bible study and spirituality. Looking back, Dieter Tewes concedes: “At that time we succeeded in initiating or strengthening spiritual self-help groups. However, these groups were more interested in doing something for their own spirituality and less focused on the community.”<sup>362</sup> It did not prove possible either to subsequently persuade these groups to become more involved in community development. “Each of these groups had a ‘genetic code’ that was incapable of change later on. We found out that the groups who were prepared to embrace a process of change ultimately disintegrated.”<sup>363</sup> In only one parish in the Diocese of Osnabrück did it prove possible to transform the original Bible-sharing group into a Small Christian Community. This continues to exist and sees itself as a lively sub-structure of its parish.<sup>364</sup>

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<sup>360</sup> Ibid, 231.

<sup>361</sup> Foitzik, A., Kirche in der Nachbarschaft, Impulse aus der Weltkirche zur Gemeindeerneuerung, in: Herder Korrespondenz 60 (2006) 9, 463-468, 467.

<sup>362</sup> Dieter Tewes, conversation on 30 May 2012. Cf. Lutz, B, o. cit.

<sup>363</sup> Dieter Tewes, conversation on 30 May 2012. Cf. Tewes, D., Kirche unter den Menschen, Small Christian Communities in großen pastoralen Strukturen, in: Unsere Seelsorge 3/2011, Münster 2011, 48-51, 51. For similar experiences in the Archdiocese of Hamburg cf. Leittersdorf-Wrobel, L., Small Christian Communities in Deutschland, Eine andere Art, Kirche vor Ort zu leben, in: missio konkret 1/2007, 13-15, 14.

<sup>364</sup> A Diocesan Working Group on Spirituality and Community Building was set up in Trier in 2003. Cf. Working Group on Spirituality and Community Building, o. cit.

Bavarian dioceses also showed an increasing interest in the Small Christian Communities model. The strength of this pastoral approach was considered to be that it focused on the community, practised a non-dominant leadership style and led to an 'amateurisation of pastoral care'.<sup>365</sup> In 2003, workshops on Small Christian Communities and on a participatory leadership style were held in many Bavarian dioceses. The meetings with Sister Tshifiwa, a member of the South African Lumko Institute, met with a great deal of interest, especially in the Diocese of Würzburg. Good neighbourliness, spirituality, social commitment and connectedness with the Church<sup>366</sup> were seen as the key pillars of this Basic Ecclesial Community-oriented approach to pastoral care.<sup>367</sup>

### **The search for a context-related designation**

At this stage there was an intensive discussion of how best to describe the process of building Small Christian Communities that had been initiated in many dioceses. Agreement was reached in the debate that expression should be given to the connection between spirituality and community building and that the aim was to arrive at a viable model of community formation.<sup>368</sup> There was, however, a general awareness that to use the terms Basic Ecclesial Group or Basic Ecclesial Community was to risk entering a minefield. In theological debates these terms were closely connected with the disputes over liberation theology in Latin America. Hence they would not prove helpful for the development of Basic Ecclesial Community structures in Germany. There was also intensive discussion of whether 'groups' or 'communities' should be formed. It transpired in the course of the debate that, in contrast to the numerous Basic Ecclesial Communities that had been formed in Germany in the 1980s, the Small Christian Communities were not interested in setting up an 'alternative Church'. The communities regarded themselves much more as an integral part of the Catholic Church or as part of the parish in which the Eucharist was celebrated in communion. Referring to the

<sup>365</sup> Cf. Spielberg, B., o. cit., 39f.

<sup>366</sup> Cf. EN 58.

<sup>367</sup> Cf. Tewes, D., *Kirche in der Nachbarschaft, Von AsIPA zu Small Christian Communities in Deutschland – Erfahrungen im Bistum Osnabrück*, o. cit., 230 f.

<sup>368</sup> Cf. The workbook of the same name "Zukunftsfähige Gemeinde" published in 2003.

connection between Small Christian Communities and the Church or parish as a Church structure, Dieter Emeis wrote: “The smaller communities must consciously seek communion with each other. This distinguishes them from self-contained circles of friends or groups of like-minded people devoted to the common pursuit of certain pleasures. By bringing together kindred spirits, smaller communities always run the risk of supporting or even reinforcing differences and distinctions between people. The community, however, should by its very nature be a sign of the power of the faith that brings together what is different and reconciles what has been rent asunder. The larger community, which assembles on Sunday for the Lord’s Supper, is also the place for those who live their faith in family and society without any involvement in a group.”<sup>369</sup>

Among the possible descriptions for the pastoral process in Germany under discussion at that time were “Joint community life in spiritual communities” and “New Church – kindling a fire together”. While these proposals did not prove acceptable, there was agreement that the subtitle for the Basic Ecclesial Community-oriented pastoral process should be “Kindling a fire together”.<sup>370</sup>

### **German National AsIPA Team**

Two representatives of the Working Group on Spirituality and Community Building, Norbert Nagler and Simone Rappel, took part in the Third AsIPA General Assembly in Seoul in September 2003 which addressed the issue of “SCCs/BECs Empowering People to Serve”.<sup>371</sup> During this meeting Orlando Quevedo stressed that Small Christian Communities, especially those in secularised societies, offer a pastoral opportunity to bring Christians together in a network.<sup>372</sup> Responding to Quevedo’s remarks, Thomas Dabre developed an ecclesiology of Small Christian Communities that was founded in

<sup>369</sup> Emeis, D., *Realistische Treue zur Vision der Gemeinde*, in: Fürstenberg, G. von / Nagler, N. / Vellguth, K., (ed.), o. cit., 13-16, 15.

<sup>370</sup> Working Group on Spirituality and Community Building, minutes of the meeting of 16/17 September 2003 (unpublished document), Aachen 2003.

<sup>371</sup> Cf. Vellguth, K., o. cit.

<sup>372</sup> Cf. Quevedo, O., *SCCs/BCCs, Empowering People to Serve*, unpublished lecture given at the Third AsIPA General Assembly on 4 September 2003, Seoul 2003.

Trinitarian theology.<sup>373</sup> Norbert Nagler later wrote the following about the status accorded to the representatives from Germany at this AsIPA General Assembly: “The learning community of Asian and German theologians had in the meantime advanced to such an extent that the German delegation no longer participated in the General Assembly as sponsors and ‘observers’, but was rather welcomed as the German National AsIPA Team and treated as such.”<sup>374</sup>

In February 2004 the first network meeting of all the Small Christian Communities in the German-speaking countries was held in Georgsmarienhütte near Osnabrück. This paved the way for the later founding of the German National Small Christian Communities Team in 2005. On the fringes of this meeting a SWOT analysis was carried out of the situation of the Small Christian Communities in Germany. It was also established that the introduction of Small Christian Communities would trigger a paradigm shift in pastoral work in line with the spirit of the Second Vatican Council and the Würzburg Synod<sup>375</sup>: Small Christian Communities transform the Church from a hierarchically structured system into a service-based system. They develop a mode of communication that rests not on preaching but on dialogue. The faithful become the subjects (and not the objects) of pastoral care. In the communities there is less teaching and more listening. Visionary work is performed. The Church is wrested away from actionism and transformed into a Church of the present. Last but not least, what emerges is a Church in which the focus is on the spiritual experience of the individual. “This means moving away from the service-based community to a community which derives from the Bible the strength and the inspiration it needs for its ecclesiastical and social work; a community that consists of a number of communities acting on their own responsibility, which are networked with each other and in which there are very specific rules for cooperation (including with the priest

<sup>373</sup> Cf. Dabre, Th, Pastoral Imperatives of Forming Small Christian Communities, lecture given at the Third AsIPA General Assembly from 3 to 9 September 2003 in Seoul; unpublished document.

<sup>374</sup> Nagler, N., o. cit., 216.

<sup>375</sup> The Würzburg Synod said: “A community whose pastoral need are served must turn into a community which puts its life at the common service of all and in the non-transferrable responsibility of each and every individual.” Synod resolution “Pastoral Services” in the community, Würzburg 1974.

and the full-time team).<sup>376</sup> This goes hand in hand with the emphasis on, and actual experience of communion ecclesiology and with a shift in emphasis away from the experience of ‘official priesthood’ in the direction of the experience of common priesthood on the part of all believers (LG).<sup>377</sup> This common priesthood of all believers does not see itself as being in competition with the official priesthood, but rather as constituting an essential characteristic of all Christians<sup>378</sup> (thereby easing the burden on the official priests) designed to ensure that the official priesthood and the common priesthood complement each other. “The task of priests and full-time staff in this system is, therefore, primarily the important service of unity. They will satisfy the growing need in the groups for more knowledge about the faith by organising seminars and courses. They will motivate the leaders, animators and ‘ministries; they will discover charismatic traits and encourage people to contribute. They will accompany, advise and spiritually strengthen the leaders of the groups and the representatives of the teams. They will gradually visit the individual groups, occasionally take part in their meetings, and celebrate services with them and in the communities. Together with a team of leaders (PGR) they will take charge of managing the community association.”<sup>379</sup> As the South African Bishop Michael Wüstenberg pointed out, the Small Christian Communities ultimately further the existence of priests: “Lay people give the shepherds spiritual strength (AA 10). If priests participate in the meetings of the Small Christian Communities, they directly encounter the joy and the hope, the grief and the fear of the individual members of their parish. [...] If ‘the world’ is a common place of spirituality of the so-called world priests [...], then the priest certainly meets the world – his spiritual home – here.”<sup>380</sup>

<sup>376</sup> Tewes, D., o. cit., 229.

<sup>377</sup> Cf. Working Group on Spirituality and Community Building, The German National SCC Team Meeting, Osnabrück 10/11 February 2004 (unpublished document), Osnabrück 2004.

<sup>378</sup> Cf. LG 32.

<sup>379</sup> Tewes, D., *Damit Kirche vor Ort lebendig bleibt, Small Christian Communities im Gemeindeverbund*, in: *Anzeiger für die Seelsorge* 115 (2006) 9, 11-15, 14. On the role of the full-time pastoral worker see also Dieter Tewes, *AsIPA – Small Christian Communities, Ein weltkirchliches Lernprojekt für die Pastoral im deutschsprachigen Raum*, o. cit., 69.

<sup>380</sup> Wüstenberg, M., *Small Christian Communities, Kraftvolle Zukunftsperspektive der Kirche als Familie*, in: *Anzeiger für die Seelsorge* 118 (2009) 10, 5-8, 8.

The network meeting of all the Small Christian Communities in Georgsmarienhütte was followed shortly afterwards by another exposure trip in March to Malaysia and Singapore, in which representatives of *missio* were joined by representatives of the dioceses of Aachen, Dresden, Erfurt, Rottenburg-Stuttgart and Würzburg and of the Faculty of Pastoral Theology at the University of Würzburg.<sup>381</sup> In the meantime the German Bishops' Conference had pricked up its ears and signalled its interest in this movement for pastoral change. In April 2004, the Chairman of the Pastoral Commission, Joachim Wanke, and the head of the Pastoral Conference, Manfred Entrich, met representatives of the Working Group on Spirituality and Community Building in Bensberg.<sup>382</sup> A few weeks later, several events devoted to Small Christian Communities were organised at the Catholics Day in Ulm, including a panel discussion with Oswald Hirmer, Fritz Lobinger, Wendy Louis and Joachim Wanke, which was attended by over five hundred Catholics Day participants.<sup>383</sup> That, too, was an indicator of the interest in this pastoral model that had in the meantime been aroused in broad circles in Germany. It had proved possible to communicate the pastoral relevance of this model, particularly in the light of the situation facing the Church in Germany. The documentary report on the Day of the Diocesan Councils in the Diocese of Osnabrück stated, for example<sup>384</sup>: "The movement towards a missionary Church is propelled by the fundamental concern to be a blessing for the world. The Church regards itself by its very nature as the advocate of the disadvantaged. In order to achieve these key pastoral prospects, in which devotion to God and to people, spiritual depth and a commitment to social welfare work can be very deeply experienced, we therefore strive [...] for initiatives that will spiritually renew the communities (everyday spiritual exercises, Small Christian

<sup>381</sup> Cf. Rappel, S., o. cit., 7. Nagler, N., o. cit., 216.

<sup>382</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 215.

<sup>383</sup> This meeting revealed the potential for conflict "between critical historical exegesis and the experience gained in Bible-sharing that God says something to everybody and enables people to pass on His Word to others as the word of life" (Simone Rappel, o. cit., 8. Cf. Vellguth, K., *Die Hermeneutik des Bibel-Teilens, Wenn das Christentum sich an seine Wurzeln faßt*, in: *Anzeiger für die Seelsorge* 116 (2007) 5, 20-23.

<sup>384</sup> Shortly beforehand, in March 2004, four Small Christian Communities had been set up in the *Wesergemeinden* Community Association in the Diocese of Osnabrück.

Communities, preparing the way seminars, prayer schools, etc.; support and care for people who can be the agents of these processes of evangelisation.)”<sup>385</sup>

### **Setting up a National Small Christian Communities Team**

The first Annual Meeting of Small Christian Communities in the German-speaking Countries was held in Hünfeld in December 2004. Organised by *missio* in the form of a future workshop, it was attended by representatives of 14 German dioceses, which had gained initial experience of Small Christian Communities and had come to regard this pastoral approach as an opportunity for the Church in Germany, particularly in the light of the decline in financial and personnel resources that was keenly felt at the time.<sup>386</sup> Proceeding from the consideration that had been given to a common ‘vision of the Church’, it was decided to set up a National Small Christian Communities Team.<sup>387</sup> This was a significant step towards institutionalisation. Another important decision taken in 2004 was to shore up the work of the Working Group on Spirituality and Community Building and of the later National Small Christian Communities Team. Dieter Tewes, who had been closely associated with the project from the very outset, was officially entrusted by *missio* with the supervision and support of the Basic Ecclesial Community pastoral concept in Germany. In committing this personal resource, *missio* ensured that the movement for pastoral change that could be observed in Germany was underpinned in institutional terms.

The year 2004 had been devoted largely to consolidating the process of spirituality and community building.<sup>388</sup> In early February

<sup>385</sup> Bistum Osnabrück, *Suche nach den Suchenden*, Tag der diözesanen Räte im Bistum Osnabrück, Dokumentation zum Tag der diözesanen Räte, 10 and 11 September 2004, Osnabrück 2004, 19.

<sup>386</sup> Cf. Nagler, N., o. cit., 217. Tewes, D., *AsIPA – Small Christian Communities*, Ein weltkirchliches Lernprojekt für die Pastoral im deutschsprachigen Raum, in: *Ordenskorrespondenz* 48 (2007) 1, 62-69, 65. Vellguth, K., *Kirche und Fundraising*, Wege einer zukunftsfähigen Kirchenfinanzierung, Freiburg 2007, 328-332.

<sup>387</sup> Cf. [http://www.missio-aachen.de/angebote-medien/bildungsangebote/asipa/Jahreskonferenz\\_2005\\_Kleine\\_Christliche\\_Gemeinschaften\\_im\\_deutschsprachigen\\_Raum.asp#0](http://www.missio-aachen.de/angebote-medien/bildungsangebote/asipa/Jahreskonferenz_2005_Kleine_Christliche_Gemeinschaften_im_deutschsprachigen_Raum.asp#0); accessed on 7 June 2012.

<sup>388</sup> Cf. Nagler, N., o. cit. 216.

2005, the National Small Christian Communities Team met in Frankfurt am Main to agree on the next steps to be taken. The minutes of this meeting record that it was a meeting of the National AsIPA Germany Team. This newly introduced designation in the minutes was an indicator that it had so far proved impossible to find a viable designation for the process in Germany. "Hitherto no satisfactory translation has been found for the English word 'community'; the German word 'Gemeinschaft' can trigger false associations and expectations. Small Christian Communities are by no means cosy, self-sufficient groups characterised by great emotional closeness. Even the key term of good neighbourliness can be misconstrued [...]"<sup>389</sup> Although a generally accepted designation for the process had yet to be found, specialist theological journals<sup>390</sup> had begun to take note of the movement for change and so agreement was reached on how articles for the various publications could be compiled. In addition, preparations were made for a Federal Conference of Small Christian Communities that was to be held at the end of the year in Hünfeld. Here again it turned out that interest continued to focus on questions of identity and self-discovery. The intention was that the Federal Conference should deal with the issue of what Small Christian Communities in Germany are and what Small Christian Communities in Germany aim to achieve.<sup>391</sup>

Three weeks after the meeting of the National Team a day of study on Small Christian Communities was held for multipliers in Würzburg. This day of study can be regarded as the launching of the AsIPA project group in the Diocese of Würzburg. In the summer, *missio* invited Wendy Louis, another advocate of the AsIPA process, to come to Germany and give seminars in the (arch)dioceses of Aachen, Berlin, Cologne, Dresden, Hildesheim, Mainz, Osnabrück and Rottenburg-Stuttgart. In the summer of 2005, too, participants

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<sup>389</sup> Foitzik, A., o. cit., 466f.

<sup>390</sup> This was indicated not least by the fact that *Lebende Seelsorge* published as many as three articles on the subject of Small Christian Communities in October 2005. Cf. Nagler, N., o. cit.; Tewes, D., *Kirche in der Nachbarschaft, Von AsIPA zu Small Christian Communities in Deutschland – Erfahrungen im Bistum Osnabrück*, o. cit.; Spielberg, B., o. cit.

<sup>391</sup> Cf. National AsIPA Germany Team, minutes of the meeting held on 2 February 2005 (unpublished document), Cologne 2005.

in the Spirituality and Community Building process from the (arch) dioceses of Hamburg, Hildesheim and Osnabrück met to launch the metropolitan project on the construction of Small Christian Communities.<sup>392</sup> Guido Brune, Ludmilla Leittersdorf-Wrobel, Dieter Tewes and Christian Hennecke had become the pacemakers in the building of Small Christian Communities in these north German dioceses. It was planned that in future there should be a regular exchange of experience between the dioceses on the question of Small Christian Communities and that, in addition, joint training courses should be provided for participants from all three dioceses.

Another important milestone was the launch of the AsIPA website [www.asipa.de](http://www.asipa.de) in July 2005. Since then up-to-date information, reports on events, experiences, etc. have been published online on this site. At the end of the year Thomas Vijay gave seminars in the dioceses of Hamburg, Hildesheim, Osnabrück and Würzburg.<sup>393</sup> During the second Diocesan Day of the Small Christian Communities in Hildesheim, in which Thomas Vijay participated in November 2005, it transpired that the grassroots pastoral approach, which was being increasingly well received, provided an answer to several challenges faced by local churches in Germany. It became clear, firstly, that the traditional form of community building would no longer be the sole form of Christian life in Germany and that, in view of the expanding pastoral areas and structures, there was a need to strengthen the Church at the local level. In addition it turned out that the catechism in Germany has a very strong focus on children and adolescents, while ever greater urgency attached to the question of how adults could be introduced to the faith and given support in their belief.<sup>394</sup>

Thomas Vijay also participated in the Annual Conference of Small Christian Communities in the German-speaking Countries, which was held in December 2005 in Hünfeld. This conference

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<sup>392</sup> Cf. Tewes, D., *AsIPA – Small Christian Communities, Ein weltkirchliches Lernprojekt für die Pastoral im deutschsprachigen Raum*, o. cit., 65. The Diocese of Münster joined this metropolitan project in 2011 and the Archdiocese of Paderborn in 2012.

<sup>393</sup> Cf. Foitzik, A., o. cit., 466.

<sup>394</sup> Cf. Kaune, M. / Hennecke, C., *Mehr als Bibel-Teilen, Auf dem Weg zu einer „Kirche in der Nachbarschaft“ im Bistum Hildesheim*, in: *Anzeiger für die Seelsorge* 115 (2006) 9, 16-19, 18.

was attended by representatives of eleven German and two Swiss dioceses.<sup>395</sup> Under the supervision of Thomas Vijay a clarification of the term Small Christian Communities was undertaken, the contours of which were still regarded by the participants as being too hazy. There was discussion of how Small Christian Communities can be distinguished from other groups; what the specific characteristics of a community (*communio*) are; how contacts with the neighbourhood in Germany should be assessed; what the indispensable fundamental elements of this pastoral approach are; and how the success this grassroots-based, participatory and spiritually oriented pastoral model has achieved in Asia and Africa can help to revitalize and reform the Church in Germany so as to ensure its future viability.<sup>396</sup> Essential characteristics of a Small Christian Community were considered to be their neighbourhood character and self-image as local level church; the common celebration of a liturgy of the word in Bible sharing; social and charitable activities; and the connection between the parish and the universal Church.<sup>397</sup> Among the other subjects discussed in Hünfeld were the extent to which the role of a priest or of full-time pastoral carers changes following the introduction of Small Christian Communities. The experiences in Asia made it quite clear that the role of the priest is enhanced: “The Asian experience shows that the work of the priests and pastoral staff is changed in this system. They are no longer essentially organisers and managers but rather spiritual and theological teachers and, of course, carers. While there is no increase in the amount of work they do, its character changes, because many of the tasks performed in the past are taken over by active members of the community in the groups as well as in the networking bodies of the groups. [...] The priest is somebody who fans the fire so that it burns more brightly. Christ

<sup>395</sup> Whereas the annual meetings of Small Christian Communities in the German-speaking countries in the period from 2005 to 2008 were directed at the representatives of the dioceses, the annual conferences from 2009 onwards were open to all those interested in building up Small Christian Communities in Germany.

<sup>396</sup> Cf. Rappel, S., o. cit. [http://www.missio-aachen.de/angebote-medien/bildungsangebote/asipa/jahreskonferenz\\_2005\\_Kleine\\_Christliche\\_Gemeinschaften\\_im\\_deutschsprachigen\\_Raum.asp#0](http://www.missio-aachen.de/angebote-medien/bildungsangebote/asipa/jahreskonferenz_2005_Kleine_Christliche_Gemeinschaften_im_deutschsprachigen_Raum.asp#0). Accessed on 7 June 2012.

<sup>397</sup> Cf. Leitersdorf-Wrobel, L., o. cit. Viecens, G. / Hußmann, W., Eine Heimat finden ... Erfahrungen aus den Small Christian Communities, in: *missio konkret* 4/2008 10-12, 10.

will ignite this fire himself.”<sup>398</sup> Looking back, Matthias Kaune and Christian Hennecke had the following to say about the experiences and reactions of the participants in this second Diocesan Day of the Small Christian Communities: “The participants are spellbound, because here they are witness to the emergence of a Church that responds to the deep-seated yearnings of many people. At the same time they are impressed by the simplicity and practicality of this model. None of the participants had anticipated that such a powerful and modern theological vision would be at the heart of the concept of Small Christian Communities.”<sup>399</sup>

### **First expert symposium**

Interest in the process of Small Christian Communities in Germany continued to grow the following year. In February 2006, the Working Group on Fundamental Issues of Pastoral Care of the Central Committee of German Catholics organised a study block on this topic in Frankfurt am Main. In March, Simone Rappel offered a day’s training on the subject of Small Christian Communities for pastoral assistants in the Diocese of Augsburg. At the Catholics Day in Saarbrücken in May a panel discussion was held with Cora Matteo, Ottmar Fuchs and Christian Hennecke. The East German dioceses also began to show an increasing interest in the movement for pastoral change. On 30 May 2006, a day of study at the Pastoral Care Office in Magdeburg was devoted to the pastoral opportunities for building Small Christian Communities at local church level. A workshop was held especially for priests in the cities of Hamburg, Hildesheim and Osnabrück in early June and at the same time there was a two-day introductory course for multipliers at the convent in Marienrode (Hildesheim).<sup>400</sup> A further three-day training course for multipliers was held in June in Hamburg and at the end of that month the pastoral model of the Small Christian Communities was presented at a plenary session of the German Catholic Missionary Council in Würzburg.

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<sup>398</sup> Tewes, D., *Damit Kirche vor Ort lebendig bleibt*, Small Christian Communities im Gemeindeverbund, in: *Anzeiger für die Seelsorge* 115 (2006) 9, 11-15, 15.

<sup>399</sup> Kaune, M. / Hennecke, C., o. cit. 19.

<sup>400</sup> For the developments in the Diocese of Hildesheim in 2006 see: *Viezens, G. / Hußmann, W.*, o. cit. 10-12.

In September 2006, the specialist journal *Anzeiger für die Seelsorge* published four feature articles on Small Christian Communities and in the same month *Herder Korrespondenz* published an article on the development of this pastoral approach in Germany. Networking also intensified at the international level. Simone Rappel and Dieter Tewes were the German delegates at the Fourth AsIPA General Assembly in the Indian city of Trivandrum, where the development of the ecclesiology of the Small Christian Communities and the relationship between these grassroots Church groups and the sacraments were discussed.<sup>401</sup> In December 2006 the first expert symposium on Small Christian Communities took place in Schmerlenbach, which was attended by over one hundred participants.<sup>402</sup> The symposium was intended to provide an answer to a number of questions: whether the method of pastoral care on which the Small Christian Communities are founded might also point the way forward for the Church in the German-speaking countries of Europe; what requirements a model of this kind should satisfy; what specific circumstances it would need to address in Europe; and which cultural, socio-political and ecclesiastical conditions would need to be taken into account.<sup>403</sup> The approach adopted by the Small Christian Communities was regarded in Schmerlenbach as an important field of experimentation for the future viability of the Church. Its strength resides in the incorporation of all Christians; the communication and networking system in the parishes and parish associations; its spiritual approach, which makes mystical experiences of God possible; its social and ecclesiastical activities at the local level; and its missionary potential.<sup>404</sup> Reflecting on the symposium Dieter Tewes later wrote: “The entire symposium reflected the situation in which the pastoral approach of the SCCs finds itself at present. Initial experience is being gathered, which gives considerable cause for hope, but questions are also being raised which will only be able to be answered in practice.

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<sup>401</sup> Cf. Tewes, D., AsIPA – Small Christian Communities, Ein weltkirchliches Lernprojekt für die Pastoral im deutschsprachigen Raum, in: o. cit. 66.

<sup>402</sup> The symposium was followed by the annual meeting of the National Small Christian Communities Team.

<sup>403</sup> Cf. Tewes, D, o. cit.

<sup>404</sup> Cf. Ibid. 68.

There are fears and uncertainties amongst the full-time staff and the parishioners in view of the pending changes in the nature of their work which will come about as a result of the restructuring of the parishes throughout Germany. There are almost no perceptible alternatives to the SCCs when it comes to the pastoral reshaping of the new large-scale structures in parishes and pastoral areas. Many full-time staff still fight shy of embracing this new model; however, it will mean switching to a new 'operating system' that will entail changes in the lives of the staff members affected."<sup>405</sup> It was agreed that an expert symposium should subsequently be held every two years.

### **The spark ignites a flame**

In February 2007, a group of people from the dioceses of Hildesheim and Osnabrück travelled to the Indian city of Nagpur to attend a seminar on Small Christian Communities.<sup>406</sup> The process of building up Small Christian Communities was consolidated in the Diocese of Hildesheim from 2007 onwards by the setting up of a special project office for the purpose. A training course for full-time staff was held in the Diocese of Augsburg in May, while an SCC workshop was held in June for the metropolitan group comprising Hamburg, Hildesheim and Osnabrück. This was attended by members of Small Christian Communities from Hildesheim, Hanover, Celle and Braunschweig, who reported on their experiences. Oswald Hirmer took part in this workshop, at which the debate centred on the ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council, which finds practical ecclesiological expression in the Small Christian Communities.<sup>407</sup> The participants were impressed by the meetings organised in the Small Christian Communities of their region. Christian Hennecke wrote the following about the SCC workshop: "The experiences in the Small Christian Communities were moving and overwhelming for the participants. The genuine welcome, the sharing of the Bible together, the tangible manifestation of the Church through the Word

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<sup>405</sup> Ibid. 68f.

<sup>406</sup> Cf. *ibid.* 66.

<sup>407</sup> Cf. [http://www.missio-aachen.de/angebote-medien/bildungsangebote/asipa/Copy\\_of\\_Workshop\\_KCG\\_Hirmer\\_Juni\\_2007.asp#0](http://www.missio-aachen.de/angebote-medien/bildungsangebote/asipa/Copy_of_Workshop_KCG_Hirmer_Juni_2007.asp#0).

and the surprising moments of awakening in these groups were very impressive.”<sup>408</sup>

The Small Christian Communities approach was presented at a forum held during the Diocesan Day of the Archdiocese of Freiburg. The Diocese of Eichstätt also showed an interest in this new form of being Church. A meeting with 15 Indian experts to explain the method of Bible-sharing was held in the Diocese of Eichstätt in July and was followed there in November by a training course on Small Christian Community Management and Leadership in Pastoral Units. In December an information meeting was organised for all the parish councils in the Diocese of Eichstätt, at which the Small Christian Communities model was explained.

In November 2007, a diocesan Small Christian Communities team was constituted in the Diocese of Hildesheim and in early December a day of study was held at the Halle/Saale Conference of Deans in the Diocese of Magdeburg, at which the grassroots pastoral model was introduced. Early December also saw the Annual Meeting of the Small Christian Communities in the German-speaking Countries, which reviewed the situation of the Small Christian Communities a few years after their foundation. This meeting was attended by representatives of 15 dioceses.<sup>409</sup> At this annual meeting Christian Hennecke emphasised that the Small Christian Communities approach involved far-reaching prospects for Christian life, in which the focus was on the quest for God’s Kingdom. He drew attention to the importance of universal Church contacts as a key resource in the global learning process.<sup>410</sup>

### **Small Christian Communities – A new way of being Church with people**

When the National Small Christian Communities Team met three months later in Würzburg for its next meeting, it once again became

<sup>408</sup> Ibid.

<sup>409</sup> This Annual Meeting of the Small Christian Communities in German-speaking Countries (3/4 December 2007) was attended by representatives of the (arch)dioceses of Osnabrück, Augsburg, Würzburg, Hildesheim, Rottenburg-Stuttgart, Berlin, Trier, Cologne, Münster, Eichstätt and Bamberg.

<sup>410</sup> Cf. National Small Christian Communities Team, minutes of the annual meeting of 3/4 December 2007 (unpublished document), Munich 2007.

apparent that the process of building up Small Christian Communities had begun in many dioceses. Participants from Augsburg, Cologne, Eichstätt, Hildesheim, Hamburg, Magdeburg, Münster, Osnabrück, Paderborn and Würzburg reported on the experiences in their dioceses. Information was also provided on the first movements for reform in neighbouring Switzerland.

In early 2008, a training course on Small Christian Communities was held in the Diocese of Würzburg and a workshop on “Small Christian Communities and the Church” in Marienrode in the Diocese of Hildesheim. This was followed in February by a workshop for priests and full-time staff on the subject of “Small Christian Communities and the Role of Full-time Staff” at the seminary in Hildesheim. The topic of Small Christian Communities was also dealt with during four events at the Catholics Day in Osnabrück. There was a panel discussion on “The Church grows locally – What we can learn from India”<sup>411</sup>, a workshop on “The Church grows from the Word: Practising Bible-sharing as a method of community building” and a workshop on “How does the Church grow at the local level? Small Christian Communities as Church in the neighbourhood”. In addition, the Catholics Day hosted the first meeting of all the members of Small Christian Communities in Germany, which served as a forum for exchange between the participants. The position paper on “Small Christian Communities – A new way of being Church with people”, issued in the run-up to the Catholics Day, represented an attempt to assess the status quo. In this document the National Small Christian Communities Team wrote: “For over 25 years now, various impulses from the universal Church concerning Small Christian Communities have been received in the German-speaking countries. The efforts to inculcate this approach have shown that it contains pastoral and theological options and principles that are important for the further shaping of the Church. We are talking here about a Church which, in all its endeavours, strives to ensure that human beings can live an abundant life, which finds expression in their relations with the poor, with God and amongst each other. We are talking about a Church that focuses on the fundamental equality of all believers, as was emphasised

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<sup>411</sup> The Catholics Day in Osnabrück also had a panel discussion on “How does the Church grow at the local level? Small Christian Communities as Church in the neighbourhood”.

at the Second Vatican Council. In this Church everyone is among the called and the sent; everyone gathers in a specific community in a specific place; everyone is capable of performing a certain service. We are talking about a Church in which various charismatic talents can fully unfold. It is the task of all priests, pastoral workers and full-time staff to discover and foster them. That is the service they provide for all the People of God. We are talking about a Church in which all those who bear responsibility or hold office adopt a serving style of leadership. This leadership style is inspired by the Gospel and finds its clearest expression in the person of Jesus. Small Christian Communities are not an end in themselves. They are a manifestation of the Church in miniature which is at the service of the coming of the Kingdom of God.”<sup>412</sup>

### **Small Christian Communities in Germany – Kindling a fire together**

The Second Expert Symposium on Small Christian Communities, held in November in Hildesheim, focussed on the ecclesiological dimension of Small Christian Communities.<sup>413</sup> In his lecture on “The Conciliar Vision of a New Kind of Church” Hermann J. Pottmeyer said that the mystery of the Church is founded in the mystery of God, whose love gave life to the Church, the new People of God, in order to begin the establishment of His Kingdom. The real mystery of the Church is the mystery of its divine mission, which corresponds with the vocation and mission of all believers. This mission is closely related to the community of the Church: *Communio* and *missio*, gathering and sending, belong together.”<sup>414</sup> In conclusion, Pottmeyer referred to the apostolic letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, in which Pope John Paul II states that the great challenge is to “make the Church *the home and the school of communion*”<sup>415</sup> and that communion is inseparably bound up with the experience of spirituality: “Let us have no illusions: unless

<sup>412</sup> National German Small Christian Communities Team, *Small Christian Communities – Ein neuer Weg, Kirche mit den Menschen zu sein, Ziele-Entwicklungsstand-Grundsätze*, Osnabrück 2008, 3.

<sup>413</sup> Cf. Hennecke, C. (ed.), o. cit.

<sup>414</sup> Pottmeyer, H.J., *Die konziliare Vision einer Kirchengestalt*, in: Hennecke, C. (ed.), o. cit., 39.

<sup>415</sup> NMI 43.

we follow this spiritual path, external structures of communion will serve very little purpose. They would become mechanisms without a soul, “masks” of communion rather than its means of expression and growth.”<sup>416</sup> Referring to these deliberations on communion and spirituality, Pottmeyer recalled that John Paul II had shown the Church the way forward, “which will enable the Church to become a communion of communities. That was, of course, the aim of the Council, which regarded the Church as a *Communio Ecclesiarum*, as a community of local churches, and wished to see it develop along those lines. Such a restructuring – and this was the Pope’s main objective that he shared with the Council – can only succeed in connection with a spiritually motivated and guided process of rethinking.”<sup>417</sup> Medhard Kehl also referred to the rooting of the Small Christian Communities model in the ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council and the considerable potential it harboured for renewal: “My impression is that it is largely unclear at present what importance the SCCs will have here in the German Church in the foreseeable future. Nevertheless, as a staunch supporter of the communion ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council, I urge that a closer look be taken – in an open and unbiased, but purposeful way – at the opportunities offered by SCCs in the current processes of restructuring and that this project be driven forward.”<sup>418</sup>

Finally, a meeting of the National Small Christian Communities Team was held in December in Würzburg, at which a process of discussion lasting several years was brought to a conclusion. It was decided that the pastoral method known in Asia as the Asian Integral Pastoral Approach (AsIPA) should be contextualised in Germany under the heading of “Small Christian Communities in Germany – Kindling a fire together” and communicated accordingly.<sup>419</sup>

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<sup>416</sup> Ibid.

<sup>417</sup> Pottmeyer, H.J., o. cit., 46.

<sup>418</sup> Kehl, M., Sind die Small Christian Communities eine Zukunftsperspektive für die Kirche in Deutschland?, in: Hennecke, C. (ed.), o. cit., 262. Cf. Kehl, M., Zukunftsperspektive für die Kirche in Deutschland? Small Christian Communities, in: *Anzeiger für die Seelsorge* 118 (2009) 10, 18-23.

<sup>419</sup> Cf. National Small Christian Communities Team in Germany, minutes of 2 December 2008 (unpublished document), Osnabrück 2008.

## German bishops experience grassroots Church in Asia

At the invitation of the Chairman of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, Archbishop Orlando Quevedo, and the Korean bishops a delegation of the German Bishops' Conference headed by Archbishop Ludwig Schick, the Chairman of the Commission for International Church Affairs, travelled to South Korea in April 2009 to find out more about the concept of Small Christian Communities.<sup>420</sup> In the dioceses of Suwon and Jeju the bishops met representatives of Small Christian Communities before coming together in Jeju to attend a seminar with bishops from various Asian countries who had many years of experience in building up Small Christian Communities. "We see our mission as being to give back warmth to the believers who have grown cold", said the members of the Small Christian Community in Korea to the representatives of the German episcopate. "We wish to act as missionaries, to approach people in the places where they live, make contacts and help wherever we are needed."<sup>421</sup> Archbishop Schick described this encounter with the pastoral model of Small Christian Communities in Asia as an "impressive implementation of the universal Church learning community". Klaus Krämer focused on the specific challenges for the Church: "We must gain more practical experience of the changes that need to be made so that in Germany, too, the Small Christian Communities can become a viable way of being Church."<sup>422</sup>

In October 2009, a delegation from Germany took part in the Fifth AsIPA General Assembly in Davao City (Philippines).<sup>423</sup> This General Assembly made it clear how important it is to differentiate between the evolution of the Basic Ecclesial Communities in the 1970s and 1980s and that of the Small Christian Communities which have

<sup>420</sup> Archbishop Ludwig Schick and missio President Klaus Krämer were joined on this journey to South Korea by Suffragan Bishops Johannes Bündgens (Aachen), Hans-Jochen Jaschke (Hamburg), Gerhard Pieschel (Limburg), Thomas Maria Renz (Rottenburg-Stuttgart) and Ludger Schepers (Essen) as well as by Ulrich Pöner und Ralph Poirel (both from the German Bishops' Conference) and Dieter Tewes (missio).

<sup>421</sup> [http://www.missio-aachen.de/angebote-medien/bildungsangebote/asipa/KCG\\_Studienreise\\_Korea\\_2009.asp#0](http://www.missio-aachen.de/angebote-medien/bildungsangebote/asipa/KCG_Studienreise_Korea_2009.asp#0).

<sup>422</sup> Ibid.

<sup>423</sup> The members of the German delegation were Gabi Viencenz, Matthias Kaune, Christian Hennecke, Simone Rappel, Norbert Nagler and Dieter Tewes.

emerged since the 1990s. The good international networking practice of the National Small Christian Communities Team was also expressed by the fact that the annual meeting of Small Christian Communities in November 2009 was held not in Germany but in the neighbouring country of Switzerland. In the Maria Lourdes parish in Zurich it was possible to see how the pastoral situation changes at the local level if Christians systematically make their way down the road to a participatory Church. This parish in Zurich had been undergoing a process of transformation since 2001, which had led to the formation of the first Small Christian Communities in 2006.

Drawing on the results of the journey undertaken to South Korea by the German Bishops' Conference in 2009, a joint discussion of the Pastoral Care Commission and the Commission for International Church Affairs of the German Bishops' Conference was held in March 2010 on the contribution of Small Christian Communities to the development of pastoral care in the (arch)dioceses in Germany. Archbishop Schick pointed out that in Germany the *missio ad intra* could only succeed in conjunction with the *missio ad extra*. The point of universal Church learning processes was not simply to copy the working methods of other churches, but rather to enable the positive experiences of other churches to be adapted to local pastoral situations. Christian Hennecke provided a survey of the initiative on spirituality and community building launched by *missio* in 2000 and highlighted the development of Small Christian Communities in Germany.<sup>424</sup> In their concluding remarks Franz-Josef Bode and Ludwig Schick reiterated that the Small Christian Communities offered a dual opportunity for the Church in Germany. On the one hand, they formed a necessary substructure of the parishes or parish communities that are becoming ever larger (and ever more anonymous). On the other hand, they encourage the development of spirituality in the communities and help to overcome an excessive focus on structural matters.<sup>425</sup>

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<sup>424</sup> Hennecke, C., Experiences up to now in Germany with Small Christian Communities. Paper given on the occasion of the joint discussions between the Pastoral Care Commission (III) and the Commission for International Church Affairs of the German Bishops' Conference on 12 March 2010, unpublished document, Hildesheim 2010.

<sup>425</sup> Joint discussions between the Pastoral Care Commission and the Commission for International Church Affairs of the German Bishops' Conference on 12 March 2010, unpublished document, Bonn 2010.

## The return of responsibility

The need for introductory courses on Small Christian Communities continued undiminished throughout the country in 2010. A course with participants from the dioceses of Augsburg, Magdeburg, Münster, Osnabrück and Paderborn was held in May in Osnabrück. A Diocesan Day of Small Christian Communities was organised in Würzburg in June. In the same month Hildesheim was the venue for the Second Small Christian Communities Summer School, at which there was a workshop for priests, a course for parish teams and a course for core teams / diocesan teams. In September there was an introductory course on Small Christian Communities in the Diocese of Hildesheim. The grassroots pastoral approach was presented at the Ecumenical Church Congress in Munich as well as during the panel discussion on “A Broad Church Needs Closeness – Small Christian Communities and Home Groups: Local Church?”

The third expert symposium on “The Return of Responsibility – Small Christian Communities and Social Initiatives as Church in the Neighbourhood” was held in Hildesheim in June. In view of the realisation that the presence of the Church must take due account of various milieus in different areas of society, the participants addressed the question of the extent to which Small Christian Communities can make a contribution to community orientation. During the symposium Klaus Dörner advocated the reunification of professional social and welfare work and civic involvement at the parish level in local churches, describing this as a strengthening of the Third Social Space. He referred to his own field research, in which it was significant that initiatives which turn their attention to others mostly take as their starting point the small communities in the context of Church parishes. He deemed this to be a sign of hope for grassroots Church groups at the local level.<sup>426</sup>

During the Annual Meeting of Small Christian Communities in the German-speaking countries in 2010 in Nuremberg interest centered on the fact that a community which has set out on the

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<sup>426</sup> Cf. Dörner, K., *Kirche im Sozialraum? Überlegungen zur Bedeutung und Chance sozialraumorientierter Gemeinschaft*, in: Hennecke, C. / Samson-Ohlendorf, M. (ed.), *Die Rückkehr der Verantwortung, Small Christian Communities als Kirche in der Nähe*, Würzburg 2011, 23-36, 33.

spiritual and participatory road to the future must come to terms with a holistic process of becoming Church. This includes the development of a vibrant liturgy, the kindling of a missionary awareness among the whole community and the transition to a culture of welcome for all the members of the community.

Of continuing importance were the journeys to Asia, which enabled interested parties to gain relevant (biographical) experience of Small Christian Communities. In 2011, a group from Hildesheim flew to the Philippines to find out more about the Basic Ecclesial Communities approach there. In addition, introductory courses or workshops were held on Small Christian Communities *inter alia* in the dioceses of Eichstätt, Hildesheim, Münster and Osnabrück. The annual meeting of Small Christian Communities took place in Bad Kissingen in November 2011. Over 70 participants from 16 dioceses (from Germany, Switzerland and Luxembourg) found out more about the home groups model in Bad Kissingen, which had evolved in a ten-year process of renewal of the faith and community reform. The emphasis in Bad Kissingen was on the fact that the groups there had developed not in, but alongside, the traditional parish structure.

Encouraged by the response to the *missio* initiative on spirituality and community building and the presentation of Small Christian Communities in local churches in Germany, *Adveniat* signalled its interest in joining *missio* in holding universal Church meetings on the Small Christian Communities / Basic Ecclesial Groups in Germany in the course of 2012.<sup>427</sup> A look at the flyer published by the two welfare organisations in early 2012 shows how broad the range of courses is on the subject of “Local Church – Basic Ecclesial Communities and Small Christian Communities”. They extend from a study trip to the Philippines to workshops and specialist conferences on the subject of Local Church Development and Church at the Local Level.<sup>428</sup> At the Catholics Day in Mannheim alone the pastoral approach of the Small Christian Communities was presented at seven events.

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<sup>427</sup> Cf. Weber, F., Eine neue Art Kirche zu sein, Was sich von den lateinamerikanischen Basisgemeinden lernen läßt, in: Herder Korrespondenz 66 (2012) 3, 128-132, 128.

<sup>428</sup> Cf. *missio/Adveniat*, Kirche vor Ort, Kirchliche Basisgemeinschaften und Small Christian Communities, Aachen 2012.

## Outlook

A concluding report on the development of Small Christian Communities in Germany cannot be written in 2012. It is only possible to look back and provide a snapshot. In retrospect it becomes apparent that the initiative on spirituality and community building at the outset of the third millennium was a response to the pastoral challenge of developing a spiritual form of being Church at the local level alongside traditional and occasionally non-committal forms of being a Christian. In this connection the crisis of the Church was seen as a propitious moment “for an original way of being Church which, as a community pastoral approach, offers a clear option for the local church”.<sup>429</sup> A conscious decision was taken to adopt an anti-cyclical approach to pastoral discussions that emphasised and favoured the development of the Church in large-scale structures. Since there are no ‘ecclesiological master plans’ in pastoral work, the inductive, bold and open-ended path of ‘trial and error’ must be pursued. In retrospect, therefore, the development of Small Christian Communities in Germany does not appear to be a linear process, but rather a meandering development propelled by a considerable momentum. “These communities are a direct response to the question of how faith can be experienced as Church in a certain place – not just as a spiritual community and not as a kind of elective spiritual community either. Hence social welfare work, the relationship with the world at large remains an essential element of this form of being Church.”<sup>430</sup> The pastoral success of this process can be attributed not least to the personal commitment of individual protagonists such as Dieter Tewes and Christian Hennecke, who provided an initial helping hand in the building of Small Christian Communities in their dioceses and well beyond. It was also helpful that an organisation such as *missio* was able to provide the institutional framework that enabled sustained learning to take place in the universal Church learning community.

The introduction of Small Christian Communities in Germany has shown that universal Church relationships are in the throes of

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<sup>429</sup> Tewes, D. / Vellguth, K., Kirche von der Basis denken, Small Christian Communities als Modell einer Kirche im Nahbereich, in: *Anzeiger für die Seelsorge* 119 (2010) 10, 33-36, 35.

<sup>430</sup> Hennecke, C., quoted after: Foitzik, A., *Neue Formen gemeindlichen Lebens*, Ein Gespräch mit Regens Christian Hennecke über Kirchenbilder, o. cit., 180.

change. 'Donor churches' and 'recipient churches' went out of existence a long time ago. In the era of globalisation at the very latest the Church in Germany has come to realise at the outset of the third millennium that, particularly in situations of crisis, a look at what is going on in the universal Church can provide new impetus for one's own pastoral activities.



# A 'Revitalisation' of Basic Ecclesial Communities

José Ferrari Marins

## Dynamic context

At a first superficial glance Basic Ecclesial Communities (BECs) appear to be a development confined to the 'Third World'. In actual fact this is not true. The so-called New Age is not interested in God and even less in churches. The Catholic Church, which has evolved out of the historical model of medieval Christianity, is facing a structural crisis. It corresponds with a statement made by Pius XII in 1952 about the condition of the world<sup>431</sup>: "It should be re-thought from the grass-roots."<sup>432</sup>

At the Medellín conference, held in response to the Second Vatican Council, it was recognised that the Church community was in danger of disappearing from ordinary people's lives and of revolving exclusively around itself.<sup>433</sup> Moreover Church structures such as parishes (particularly in the realm of bureaucracy and the pastoral model) did not involve assumptions of being a primary authority of the Church. Nor did they represent a Church reality with the capacity to act as the leaven of the Gospel for God's kingdom in the modern world.

It was against this background that the Second General Conference of Latin American Bishops took place (Medellín 1968), influenced by movements in various countries<sup>434</sup>, inspired by the

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<sup>431</sup> See the speeches of 10 February and 15 October 1952.

<sup>432</sup> The Pope's original sentence in Italian was formulated more strongly: "rifare delle fondamenta" – restore thoroughly from the foundations.

<sup>433</sup> Being largely concerned with many forms of piety, sacraments, liturgy, catechism, administration, lack of priestly vocation ...

<sup>434</sup> The first steps towards Basic Ecclesial Communities were taken at the end of the 1950s in Brazil (Barra do Pirai, RJ; S. Paulo do Potengi, RN; Pirambú, CE; Cravinhos, SP) and

Second Vatican Council<sup>435</sup> and strengthened by ‘normative’ texts (Revelation) of the first New Testament communities.<sup>436</sup> At that time a historically unique pastoral decision was taken which was to have enormous consequences. It triggered the emergence of a ‘new Church model’ starting from where the ‘last ones’ left off. (Beginning from the periphery of the institution, it gave serious thought to the subject of God’s People, as taken up and co-ordinated by the hierarchy – *Lumen Gentium*, Chapter 2; its presence and ability to act marked the beginning of God’s kingdom and the proclamation of the kingdom (where “people’s lives unfold”<sup>437</sup>). It represented an option in favour of Basic Ecclesial Communities as covered in the sixteen subject areas announced at that conference.<sup>438</sup>

## Steps

The steps presented below complement each other but they are not the only way of proceeding. They do not represent any previously established, closed-off spheres. They are not a cure-all and do not form a constant in all diocesan churches.

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shortly afterwards in Panama (San Miguelito), the Dominican Republic (Santiago de los Caballeros) and Ecuador (Riobamba).

<sup>435</sup> Especially LG 1, 8, 9, 26; GS 1.

<sup>436</sup> As described in the Acts of the Apostles and the Apostolic Letters (Acts 2:42; 4:32).

<sup>437</sup> An expression coined by the Church of Ciudad Guzmán in Mexico.

<sup>438</sup> See the Latin American Episcopal Conference (CELAM), *The Church in the current transformation of Latin America in the light of the Council, Complete resolutions of the Second General Conference of Latin American Bishops, Medellín, 24.8 – 6.9.1968*, in: Secretariat of the German Bishops’ Conference (ed.), *The Church of Latin America, Documents of the Second and Third General Conference of Latin American Bishops in Medellín and Puebla, Voices of the Universal Church, No. 8, Bonn 1979, 123, Document 5, no.10. Supporting Humanity: 1. Justice, 2. Peace, 3. Family and Demography, 4. Education, 5. Youth, evangelisation and strengthening belief; 6. General pastoral care, 7. Pastoral care of elites, 8. Catechism, 9. Liturgy. The visible Church and its structures, 10. Lay movements, 11. Priests, 12. Members of religious orders, 13. Education of the clergy, 14. Poverty of the Church, 15. Pastoral de conjunto, 16. Social communication media. Particularly about the documents of Pastoral de conjunto (15), Justice (2) and Peace (3). [‘Pastoral de conjunto’ is a co-operative pastoral project incorporating various Church groups and levels which seeks to co-operate with all people of good will in solving human need. (Translator’s note in the German version.)].*

***Step one: general motivation***

General motivation incorporates specific aspects: the ministry of Jesus, the first Christian communities of the New Testament, the Holy Church, discipleship and the mission that gives life, the Second Vatican Council, the conferences in Latin America and the Caribbean and *the reality that challenges us and presents opportunities*. The model embodied in the Basic Ecclesial Communities has its focuses, priorities, structures, participating methodology and spirituality, which influence the whole of its activity. All possible means (sermons, assemblies, training courses) must be used to motivate those who already take part in community life (regularly or occasionally) and to continue developing Basic Ecclesial Communities rooted in the Church. Motivation is generated not only by word of mouth, by passing on the content that reinforces the idea, but should also be manifested in specific actions. This motivation phase can last for about a year.

***Step two: the units***

At this stage the parishes have to be split up into individual units. Structural decentralisation of this kind will not lead to the creation of Basic Ecclesial Communities all by itself, however. We are not dealing with simple mini-versions of parish structures that have already been outgrown, but with the sprouting of a seed, a new model with an ecclesiology as its foundation.

Re-structuring, or a change of visions, priorities and, above all, of the model, will lead to a strengthening of the small Tridentine parishes.<sup>439</sup> The idea of Basic Ecclesial Communities complies with Church life and its mission as formulated by the Second Vatican Council. This is not about re-painting a house as a way of re-designing it. Nor is it about a new house that accommodates a family in which no changes have been made. This is about people building the right kind

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<sup>439</sup> Up to now the parish has been, and for many people still is, the only canonical Church base for baptised Catholics. But this is precisely what need. to be reconsidered today. The parish on its own is structurally incapable of reaching the majority of baptised Catholics; it is constructed according to the model of a strictly clerical and centralised "Christendom". Its language, priorities and representatives are far removed from present-day realities and concentrate almost exclusively on the realms of prayer, pastoral care and administration, and to a minor extent on catechism and liturgy.

of house for a new kind of family experience. The starting point for this new development is not just a change in the parish structure, but also a change in the way community is experienced, the way in which life is given a present-day relevance, the Word of God is read, the obligation to transform society is taken on, the power of community is understood and organised, and relationships with other Church institutions are fashioned.

This grouping is primarily intended to strengthen the Church model of Basic Ecclesial Communities. The parish ceases to be the Church base and takes on the role of articulation and co-ordination.<sup>440</sup>

This is about:

- defining a human, territorial or functional space which is taken over as a church base by a group (support unit) for animation and co-ordination purposes; it is not about putting up canonical boundaries as in the case of parishes.
- finding out who can be counted on in a particular area so that these people can become supporters and founders of BECs; they should be trained to be helpful and considerate and to take appropriate action;
- solving logistical and operational problems, such as the venue and frequency of meetings;
- enabling life to be lived in a community, as inspired by the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 2:42);
- building personal, not merely episodic, relationships with people with whom hitherto only occasional meetings have taken place or whom one has met in family situations.
- sharing the worries, joys, suffering and expectations of daily life of all individuals and their families, also in relation to work;

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<sup>440</sup> Therefore the parish as a network of communities does not pursue the strategy of multiplying Church cells but makes intensive efforts in the sense of a missionary community and a community mission to be a Samaritan church which designs life and supports life. Support for the particular pastoral projects and articulation of the pastoral council aim to help the Basic Ecclesial Communities in their life according to the new Church model of the Second Vatican Council.

- engaging in conversation and discussion about events, books, films, newspaper reports, novels, etc. within the meaning of the Word of God and one's own faith (family values or one's own values). This is about approaching people not only 'with the Bible' but also 'as in the Bible'. This is about a journey as a community, not as a single individual.
- praying, celebrating one's faith with symbols, hymns and silent worship, and cultivating one's ability to gain a profound understanding of the situation of people and groups;
- facing the challenge posed by the situation of poor people, not only through aid and support but also through structural changes;
- seeking allies; taking part in meetings and performing tasks for the common good as well as supporting liberation initiatives;
- being aware of the presence of God's Spirit in reality, in time, in people and communities; using and extending common ground that already exists through the inspiration of your own faith. You never begin from scratch because God's Spirit is already present in people. It is important to find out how He is already working.
- supporting and promoting more open activities with newly interested people: Christmas, Holy Week, Mother's Day, ecological campaigns, training courses and celebrations of the Resurrection. Care should be taken to ensure that establishing contacts with others is not simply turned into a kind of 'show' for distributing food or similar campaigns of that type.
- holding parish meetings of the Basic Ecclesial Communities on a weekly basis or more often if required; it would also make sense to set up a special pastoral council of Basic Ecclesial Communities in close agreement with the parish council.

**Step three: advisers**

Their most important task is to<sup>441</sup>:

- set up the Basic Ecclesial Communities in such a way that they get into areas which are generally beyond the scope of systematic and effective pastoral care and can create spaces in which 'sinners' and those who have lost touch with the Church as an institution can feel accepted.
- use the many opportunities for meeting people, such as in case of illness, celebrations and significant religious events of popular piety.
- detach the religious and spiritual life of the parish from baptisms, first communions, celebrations of the Resurrection, etc.
- stimulate the development of a spiritual group experience. This type of living spirituality constitutes the mysticism of the community as a local church. (This does not mean the spirituality of a particular movement or programme.) Jesus and His teachings gradually assume central importance in community life. A grateful reading of the Word of God deepens faith, and popular piety with all its symbols is evaluated, accepted and re-assessed with Jesus as the starting point.
- visit families several times in the course of a year. Family visits are 'as in the Bible', not just 'with the Bible'.<sup>442</sup> A visit represents not just a stage in the process, but also the Church's simple way of establishing a link with its surroundings.
- build up contacts with the young people in the parish, listen to them, and over time enable youth work to be developed and co-ordinated by young people themselves and not by adults.

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<sup>441</sup> It is not absolutely essential to put everything defined and explained here into practice. The great majority of new pastoral directions that have been undertaken in the history of the Church have 'not been ordered, but have not been forbidden either.'

<sup>442</sup> Unlike conversion visits, during which there is no dialogue, but merely a short-lived conversation in proselytising style.

## Strategic lessons

Let us make some comparisons:

- A snake grows its new skin under the old one. As soon as the new skin is ready, the old one falls off. Taking the old one away earlier would mean killing a living animal.
- Or a micro-dose<sup>443</sup>: this is a common term in alternative medicine and means a therapeutic process in which the deciding factor is quality not quantity. Basic Ecclesial Communities, too, can be seen as a micro-dose of a new Church model.
- An African proverb says: "Little people in little places who build little houses cause big changes!" Like the great historian Arnold Joseph Toynbee we can say: "At difficult times in human history it has always been a qualified creative minority who found a way out, and later the majority united with that minority."
- Communities learn to live with a minimum of structures and a maximum of life. With existing oppressive structures there can often be very little life.
- Every hour is God's hour and so every hour is suitable for beginning God's work.
- You should work with what you have got and not with what you wished you had.
- It is essential to work communally, in a team, because Jesus promises to be with those who meet in His name (Matthew 18:20).
- The special thing about Jesus is the Good News, not threats of divine vengeance.

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<sup>443</sup> A therapeutic process that is not scrutinised by big laboratories but can be carried out by patients themselves without prescriptions and at low cost. There is no instant cure and no side effects, but it takes time. This makes very clear what Basic Ecclesial Communities are all about: they are in people's own hands; no complicating structures of production, commercialisation, etc. arise; there are no negative side-effects; this is a process, not a result; they need a lot of time, but they are effective; they are not subject to official propaganda from people who commercialise medicine (or faith or pastoral care.)

- Christian communities are neither homogeneous nor uniform. They come in a multiplicity of models and remain faithful to the elements of proclamation and the ideas of the Latin American Bishops' Conferences, which are applicable to the current historical moment.
- The early Christian communities did not have mass devotional Christianity.
- Conversion to Jesus and baptism inevitably meant belonging to a community.
- Tasks occur in the community as needs arise. God's Spirit never stops sending vocations to the Church; the crucial thing is simply to recognise and nurture them.
- In Latin America the Basic Ecclesial Communities appear together with the Church as a whole. In their organisational structure they are situated at the lowest level, i.e. where people live. At the second level they take part in a large network of communities within the parish. The third level is the diocese, which provides support for an appropriate path to be taken by Basic Ecclesial Communities. At every level there is a team that supports and accompanies people on their journey. At regional level, communication is managed by a group that represents the various dioceses and in which the needs and challenges of the individual dioceses can be discussed so that the necessary support can be given by this top-level group.

This organisational superstructure for the Basic Ecclesial Communities is a process in itself which is neither top-down nor uniform.

### **Closing remarks**

There are global trends affecting the future of the Church and hence the future of the Basic Ecclesial Communities, such as the massive extension of the liberal capitalist model, which will not only attain global hegemony but will also become the criterion of national and personal security.

Grace will become greater (Romans 5:20; 1 Corinthians 10:13; Hebrews 4: 15-16) but will have to withstand a test (1 John 5:5). The processes are very slow, it is God who determines the pace of change. This calls for well-trying patience and is an invitation to become aware of the presence of God's Spirit. Happy is he who lives life and has a thousand reasons for living.

Out of today's crisis there will emerge a Church that has lost a great deal. It will be small and to a large extent it will begin all over again. It will not have enough members to fill the space in the many buildings left by the age of great splendour. Due to its low number of members it will lose many of the privileges it enjoys in society. But it will be strengthened by what it has experienced up to now and will progress as a community of volunteers who belong to it of their own free will. As a small community it will demand a great deal more initiative from individual members and will certainly also produce new kinds of office or ministry. The project of professional lay members is appropriate in this context, but it does not solve the fundamental problem, which is that BECs need officials. In many small communities and in similar social groups, too, evangelisation will take place in this way. The position of priest will obviously still be indispensable.

Furthermore, despite all these changes that we in the Church anticipate, I think that, once we have experienced renewal and our resolve has been strengthened, we can find a place in which the same central issue is significant: belief in the one and triune God, in Jesus Christ the Son of God, and in the Holy Spirit. The Basic Ecclesial Community will find its anchor point of life in faith and in prayer, where the sacraments are lived as divine service and not as a problem of liturgical interpretation.

A Church is emerging in which political opinion does not predominate and there is no left-wing or right-wing influence. It will put great effort into pursuing this development, since the process of building up and thriving will be very hard work. It will be a Church of poor people and little people. Implementing it will be laborious because of the links of restricted narrow-mindedness among those who hold fast to their arrogance.

Obviously all this will take a lot of time. The journey will be long and arduous, as the journey of the Church has been up to now.

Nevertheless, it should be possible to withdraw from the lap of an introverted and seriously simplified Church. People who live in a completely planned world are inevitably hounded by loneliness. Since God has completely vanished from their lives, the disappointments they experience reveal the whole terrible poverty in which they are trapped. In the small community of those who are creating something really new there rests the hope of an answer to all their hidden questions.

The Church today is indisputably going through very difficult times. Its true crisis is only just beginning and we must anticipate some upheavals. It is also absolutely certain, however, that what will remain in the end is not a Church geared to the political practice of religion, but a Church full of faith. It will no longer be a dominant force in society as it has been up to now, but for whoever so wishes, it will rise again and, thriving on its humanity, will become a source of life and hope beyond death.

The Christian communities will directly and pragmatically represent the two fundamental messages of Christianity which make it universal and a meeting place for everyone. The first is the option for the one and only God, who became man in Jesus Christ. This God withstands mammon (money, power, pleasure, the idols of neo-liberal globalised society and hegemony). The second is the option for those in need.

Basic Ecclesial Communities will not simply evolve of their own accord. They will require work on the part of the Christian communities. In order to be ready for God's offer in Jesus, the Church and the Basic Ecclesial Communities must embrace the longed-for options.

As in the well-known romance, Jesus will ask His Church exactly the same question as He asked Peter when he was fleeing again: "Whither goest thou?" Will the Church accept the neo-Constantine reforms (awakened by the dreams of Christianity at the opening of the Colosseum) or will it return to the catacombs?

In the words of Pedro Casaldáliga:

Es tarde, pero es nuestra hora.

Es tarde, pero es todo el tiempo que tenemos a mano para hacer futuro.

Es tarde, pero somos nosotros esta hora tardía.  
Es tarde, pero es madrugada si insistimos un poco.

It is late, but it is our hour.  
It is late, but this is all the time we have to make a future.  
It is late, but we ourselves are this late hour.  
It is late, but it is dawn if we insist a little.



# Basic Ecclesial Communities in ASIA

Estela P. Padilla

## Asian Context <sup>444</sup>

Asia is the world's largest (30% of the earth's land area) and most populous continent (about 60% of the world's population). It is divided into central (e.g. Kazakhstan), east (e.g. Japan), southeast (e.g. Philippines), south (e.g. India) and west (e.g. Iran) – 51 countries in all.

Asian tigers (fast-growing economies) Japan, South Korea, Hongkong, Taiwan and Singapore have received developed country status. Asia is also very rich in natural resources. However, Asia also houses 2/3 of the world's poor with 80-90% of them living in rural areas. It is the most disaster-prone region in the world, suffering half of the world's natural disasters.

In terms of political systems, there are: constitutional monarchies (e.g. Thailand), absolute monarchies (e.g. Brunei), one-party states (e.g. China), federal states (e.g. Malaysia), dependent territories (e.g. Hongkong), liberal democracies (e.g. Philippines), and military rule (e.g. North Korea). There are also various forms of independent movements.

The vastness of land, also means varied social, environmental and cultural conditions. To give an idea: more than 800 languages are spoken in India and more than 600 in Indonesia. Since language is culture, this would mean thousands of varied, rich, colorful cultures. Every country could have hundreds of ethnic groups, as well as indigenous peoples.

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<sup>444</sup> The following general information on Asia are taken from: The New Encyclopedia Britannica 15<sup>th</sup> edition, Vol. 1, 2007 and Wikipedia.

Asia is the seedbed of the world's religions. Judaism, Christianity, Islam originated in West Asia. Judaism is practiced primarily in Israel. In the Philippines and East Timor, Roman Catholicism is the predominant religion (more than 80%). All over Asia, only 3% would be practicing Christianity. The world's largest Muslim community is in Indonesia. The religions of Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism originated in India. In China and Japan, Confucianism, Taoism and Zen Buddhism took shape.

### Asian Church

In Asia, Catholics<sup>445</sup> represent only 2.9% of the nearly 3.5 billion Asians. Moreover, well over 50% of all Asian Catholics are found in one country – the Philippines. Thus, if one excludes the Philippines, Asia is only about 1% Catholic. Despite its extreme minority status, the Catholic Church in Asia continues to grow: from 84 million (1988) to 105 million in 1997 (a 25% increase). Most of the Asian clergy and religious are indigenous.

The Federation of Asian Bishops Conferences (FABC) developed a new vision of church and new way of understanding mission, as follows:

- 1) The Church in Asia will be a “truly local Church, a “Church incarnate in people, a Church indigenous and inculturated.”<sup>446</sup>
- 2) This Church brings the Good News of the Kingdom of God through its ‘triple dialogue with the poor, with cultures, with religions’ believing that the Spirit is at work in the religious-cultural traditions and socio-political realities of Asia.<sup>447</sup>
- 3) The spirit/spirituality that sustains this vision and mission is harmony: “Interreligious dialogue is not ultimately our project, but our response to God dialoguing with individuals

<sup>445</sup> For resources on statistics of the Asian churches, consult *Statistical Yearbook of the Church* (Vatican Press); cited in: Phan, P., *Reception of Vatican II in Asia*, in: FABC Papers No. 117, 111.

<sup>446</sup> Gnanapiragasam, J. /Wilfred, F., *Being Church in Asia*, Theological Advisory Commission Documents 1986-1992, Vol. 1, Quezon City, 1994, 32-78.

<sup>447</sup> Office for Theological Concerns, *The Spirit at Work in Asia Today*, FABC Paper No. 95, 1997.

and peoples in a variety of ways, which are articulated in the plurality of religions. Hence we can walk together on the path of dialogue and service towards harmony as sisters and brothers bound in one love and drawn by the Divine Truth.”<sup>448</sup>

Asian bishops note: “This dialogue will allow us to touch the expression and the reality of our people’s deepest selves, and enable us to find authentic ways of living and expressing our own Christian faith. It will reveal to us also many riches of our own faith which we perhaps would not have perceived. Thus, it can be a sharing in friendship of our quest for God and brotherhood among His sons.”<sup>449</sup>

Dialogue, in the Asian sense, is understood as dialogue of 1) daily life, 2) collaborative action, 3) theological exchange and 4) religious experience. Though dialogue, Asian churches hope to live out its mission of liberation/justice, inculturation and interreligious harmony<sup>450</sup>.

### **BECs<sup>451</sup> in ASIA**

The vastness and variety that is Asia would also be manifested in its church life. So much literature has been produced on BECs from different Asian countries. This paper’s exploration of BEC has a very limited scope – it only attempted to look into BECs using a particular approach – AsIPA (Asian Integral Pastoral Approach). Although the study has been called ‘perhaps the first scientific study of BECs in Asia’<sup>452</sup>, it is still a very limited and initial study of a small representative sample of BECs in Asia.

<sup>448</sup> Bishops’ Institute for Interreligious Affairs (Bira) V/3, 160 (no. 9); cited also in: Wostyn, L., Vatican II and the Asian Theology of Harmony, in: Aurea, J./Ang, R. (ed.), Vatican II, 40 Years After, Manila 2007, 201.

<sup>449</sup> FABC 1, #16, cited in: Kroeger, J., Ecclesiological Developments in Asia, in: Aurea, 279-296.

<sup>450</sup> FABC 7, #17.

<sup>451</sup> The term “Small Christian Communities” has become more popular in Asia. However, this paper will use BECs (Basic Ecclesial Communities) for the sake of uniformity.

<sup>452</sup> Bp. Fritz Lobinger of South Africa (co-founder of Lumko Pastoral Institute where AsIPA originated from) commenting on the AsIPA survey in the FABC-OLF Newsletter Dec. 2012.

There are definitely other approaches used in BEC-organizing and formation all over Asia but AsIPA would be the most organized, supported as it is by the FABC through its Office of Laity as an official arm for promoting a Participatory Church in Asia<sup>453</sup>. As an approach, AsIPA seeks to be rooted in the Asian context and culture, integrating spirituality and action as well as all the efforts and actors at the level of the local church<sup>454</sup>.

Comments about BECs therefore in this paper does **not** refer to BECs in Asia but to BECs that were part of this limited, initial survey.

### AsIPA Survey on BECs

Since the '90s, AsIPA workshops on Participatory Church have been given to more than 12 Asian countries. AsIPA materials and resources were influenced by the works of the Lumko Pastoral Institute in South Africa. AsIPA texts, used for BEC formation, have been translated into more than 20 languages<sup>455</sup>.

In 2009, AsIPA Desk decided to survey BECs in Asia, specifically those using AsIPA approach and materials for at least 5 years. Coordinated by East Asia Pastoral Institute, a team of Philippine theologians conducted surveys with 75 BEC member-respondents (using Frequency Evaluation and Quality Evaluation) and Focus Group Discussions with 25 BEC member-respondents (from the 75 who answered the survey) coming from 3-5 parishes belonging to 5 dioceses from 5 Asian countries (South Korea, Thailand, Philippines, India, Sri Lanka)<sup>456</sup>. The surveys and the FGDs were done in the local language with a facilitator who translated to the assigned theologian<sup>457</sup>.

<sup>453</sup> Mentioned by the FABC as a vision of church in its 5<sup>th</sup> Plenary Assembly in Bandung, Indonesia in 1990.

<sup>454</sup> This paper's author is part of this AsIPA Resource Team, being a founding member when it started in 1993.

<sup>455</sup> AsIPA texts or formation programs for nourishing the vision of a Participatory Church are published by the FABC-Office of Laity. Lumko materials, which inspired AsIPA materials, are from the LUMKO Pastoral Institute in Delmenville, South Africa.

<sup>456</sup> EAPI printed the survey results and reports in: F. Macalinao (ed.), AsIPA Research Project, East Asia Pastoral Review Vol 48 (2011) No.1-2, Quezon City, 2011.

<sup>457</sup> Emmanuel de Guzman, Ph.D (reported on the BECs of the Diocese of Jeju in Korea); Jose de Mesa, Ph.D.,(Diocese of ThareNongSaeng in Thailand); Ando Macalinao SJ, STD

The framework of 'communion and mission' was used to evaluate the BECs, especially as it applies to the triple-dialogue focus of the Asian church. Following are some general information about the Church in the country and dioceses surveyed.

## 1. INDIA<sup>458</sup>

The origins of BEC in India started when Jose Marins and his team (Brazil) went to Bangalore for a seminar in 1981. Fr. M. J. Edwin from Kottar Diocese and Fr. Bosco Penha (now Bishop) from Bombay started and developed BECs in their area which quickly spread to other dioceses. In the Conference of Catholic Bishops of India held in 1992 in Pune, the bishops decided to make BECs a pastoral priority for the Church in India.

### *Mangalore*

In 1990, Fr. Arthur Pereira, Director of Pastoral Institute, set the BECs work in motion. He trained parish animators, translated many AsIPA books and Lumko lessons into local language, Konkani, and produced 7 books. Animation Teams (parish and vicariate) are formed to handle the ongoing training of leaders both at the parish and the BECs levels.

## 2. SRI LANKA<sup>459</sup>

The Catholic faith came to Sri Lanka via the Portuguese in 1505. There are 11 dioceses in Sri Lanka and the Catholic population is approximately 1.6 million, 7% of the total population. Fortunately the Christians especially the Catholics have followers both among the Sinhalese as well as the Tamils. Religious as well as ethnic tension exists among the followers of the different religions and tribes.

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(Diocese of Mangalore in India), Msgr. Manny Gabriel, STD (Diocese of Nueva Segovia in the Philippines) and Jeyaraj Rasiah SJ, STD (Diocese of Kurunegala, Sri Lanka).

<sup>458</sup> Macalinao, F., AsIPA Research Project Report, Archdiocese of Mangalore, South India, in: Macalinao, EAPR, 101-118; data taken also from the report of Gordon Morris from CBCI-Commission on Laity in the BEC Asian Assembly held from Sept 2-5, 2011, in: One World Center, Taipei, Taiwan.

<sup>459</sup> Rasiah, J., AsIPA Research Project Report, Archdiocese of Kurunegala, Sri Lanka, in: Macalinao, F., EAPR, 79-100. Data taken also from the report of Fr. Emmanuel Ravichandran representing Sri Lanka in the BEC Asian Meeting held in Sept 2-5, 2011, in: One World Center, Taipei, Taiwan.

The first attempt to promote BECs began in the late '70s with Fr. Reid Shelton of Kelaniya. Inspired by the idea of forming small groups, about which he had read material from Philippines, he went to Brazil for 3 months to learn about the Latin American experience. He later became the BEC diocesan coordinator and BECs spread in a lot of parishes. In 1995, an AsIPA team conducted a workshop attended by bishops, priests, religious and lay people from all the dioceses. The Sri Lankan Bishops' Conference has issued three joint pastoral letters in 10 years to intensify their efforts in making the church a "participatory communion".

### *Kurunegala*

The Diocese of Kurunegala was erected in 1987. According to Fr. Rufas Thalys, Diocesan Coordinator, 29 parishes (out of a total of 30) are organised on the basis of BECs.

### **3. PHILIPPINES<sup>460</sup>**

In the late '60s, foreign missionaries in Mindanao and Negros formed the first BECs. The Mindanao-Sulu Pastoral Conference which was first held in 1971 and since then meets every 3 years was instrumental in propagating these BECs all over Mindanao. Some dioceses and parishes in Visayas and Luzon would soon adopt the formation of BECs as their pastoral thrust. The first wave of BECs emerged during the martial law regime of Ferdinand Marcos. Suspected as being influenced or infiltrated by the Left, BECs were harassed by the military and some leaders and members were arrested and even murdered.

After the fall of the Marcos regime and the restoration of democracy, it became easier to build up BECs and engage in social action. BECs were involved in anti-logging, anti-mining and anti-dam campaigns; setting up livelihood projects and cooperatives and establishing peace zones in areas affected by armed conflict. In 1991, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Plenary Council supported the vigorous promotion and formation of BECs all over the country was adopted as a pastoral priority.

<sup>460</sup> Gabriel, M., AsIPA Research Project Report, Archdiocese of Nueva Segovia, Philippines, in: Macalinao, F., EAPR, 119-136. Data taken also from the report of Fr. Amado Picardal of the CBCP-BEC Desk representing the Philippines in the BEC Asian Meeting held on Sept 2-5, 2011, in: One World Center, Taipei, Taiwan.

### ***Nueva Segovia***

The Archdiocese is known for its pastoral thrust which is the formation of *Simbaan Sangkakarrubaan*- ‘church in the neighborhood’- and establishing *barangay* (village)-based catechisms for children, youth, adults and families. Structures of participation and empowerment are in place – Pastoral and Finance Councils in all the 40 parishes.

## **4. THAILAND<sup>461</sup>**

The Catholic Church in Thailand is constituted by 2 archdioceses and 8 dioceses, with around 700 priests and over 1500 religious. The number of Catholics is about 300,000 among a population of around 66 million.

### ***Thare-Nongsaeng***

The Archdiocese of Thare-Nongsaeng has over 3 million people, with about 1% Catholics. In 2006, 56 priests and 131 religious were ministering in 74 parishes and church institutions. The creation and continual growth of BECs is the priority pastoral program of the Archdiocese which has established 431 BECs in 74 parishes.

## **5. SOUTH KOREA<sup>462</sup>**

Baptized in Beijing in 1784, Seung Hoon Lee, one of the scholars who studied Catholicism, returned to Korea and began to baptize other Koreans. These believers gathered as *Myongryebang* a Christian faith community. The Catholic faith was voluntarily accepted and spread by the laity and their faith communities without foreign missionaries and priests until 1795.

The government, steeped in Confucianism, considered Catholicism as subversive and “as a dangerous belief that contravenes the social

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<sup>461</sup> Mesa, J. de, AsIPA Research Project Report, Archdiocese of Thare-Nongsaeng, Thailand, in: F. Macalinao, EAPR, 137-152.

<sup>462</sup> Guzman, E. de, AsIPA Research Project Report: Diocese of Jeju, S. Korea, in: Macalinao, F., EAPR, 54-78. Data taken also from the report of Ms. Bibiana Ro, National BEC Coordinator representing S. Korea in the BEC Asian Meeting held on Sept 2-5, 2011, in: One World Center, Taipei, Taiwan.

hierarchical system.” Severe persecution and suppression of Catholics lasted from 1791 to 1886 and about 10,000 of the faithful died as martyrs. From among the martyrs, 103 were canonized in 1984 (11 clergy and 92 lay - 47 women and 45 men). In 2010, the Church of Korea consists of 16 dioceses and 1,609 parishes; 5 million Catholics, about 10 % of the total population; and with 4,490 priests.

### *Jeju*

The volcanic island of Jeju has 565,000 citizens, with 12% of the population Catholics. The Catholic Church in Jeju has 2 bishops, 40 priests, 24 parishes, and 11 sub-parishes (2005).

<b>SUMMARY TABLE OF SURVEY RESULTS</b>					
<b>COMMUNION</b>	<b>IN</b>	<b>PH</b>	<b>SL</b>	<b>TH</b>	<b>SK</b>
<b>PRAYER LIFE</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Having a personal relationship with, better knowledge and appreciation of, “living and sharing” the Word of God</li> <li>• Able to pray spontaneously; deeper realizations with a personal God; “more Christ-centered life”</li> <li>• Learned to pray more from the heart; Eucharistic celebrations have become more meaningful</li> </ul>	/	/	/	/	/
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Family became Christ- and Word-centered; attend Sunday mass as family</li> </ul>	/		/		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• BEC responds to formation of laity as agents of evangelization;</li> <li>• “Transform consciousness”: bible sharing helps them to “treat others as God treats them” and “proclaim His kingdom on earth”</li> </ul>		/			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The most important task of the church is “proclaiming and evangelization” or “teaching” which “continues the work of Jesus”</li> </ul>				/	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “to be free from sin and return to the sacraments”</li> </ul>				/	
<b>RELATIONSHIPS</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Personal changes in one’s self and towards others; “experience more genuine community, a sense of belonging, harmony”; a means of socializing; learned to listen, relate as brothers and sisters with their families and neighbors resulting in improved relationships; Formation of a faith community that has intimacy, mutual support and participatory character</li> </ul>	/	/	/	/	/

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• More sensitive to the joys, pains and needs of their neighbors; strengthen relationships by decreasing ethnic divisions; BEC leaders participate in common Buddhist celebrations; some Buddhist conversion</li> </ul>			/		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• BEC is for all – “no more discrimination between the rich and poor”</li> </ul>		/			
<b>MINISTRIES</b>	/	/			/
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Growth in taking up and sharing leadership responsibilities</li> </ul>					
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Greater participation in parish life; deeper unity, cooperation, collaboration among bishops, priests, lay</li> </ul>	/	/	/	/	/
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participation in the life of the Church means “being a Good Catholic” which means “giving witness”</li> </ul>				/	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reaching out to others in need through “giving love because all are equal”, “forgiving the neighbor”, “visiting, sympathizing, helping, sharing (food, goods)”</li> </ul>				/	
<b>CULTURE</b>	/	/			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Familiar cultural expressions are constantly used in Gospel-sharing; distinctly Mangalorian (use of traditional leaders gurkars, traditional neighborhood units vado; use of local language konkany)</li> </ul>					
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• BEC is focused on evangelization of cultures</li> </ul>		/			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Integrating with culture (“WE culture”, sharing of food, hospitality)</li> </ul>				/	
<b>MISSION</b>	<b>IN</b>	<b>PH</b>	<b>SL</b>	<b>TH</b>	<b>SK</b>
<b>LOVE OF NEIGHBOR</b>	/	/	/		/
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• love of neighbor expressed through help, respect, sharing, being one in hope and celebrations, treating neighbors as family; home visits, esp. orphans, elderly, and the sick; healthcare, listening and bringing good news; aid to the homeless</li> </ul>					
<b>INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE</b>	/	/	/	/	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• By service and actions, “life dialogue” takes place; reaching out to non-Christians, esp. through social (not religious) gatherings such as birthdays, weddings, burials, fiestas, funerals; reconciliation services; share what they have in the spirit of good neighborhoodliness; learn from Buddhists regarding “devotedness to their faith”</li> </ul>					
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collaborate with peoples of other faiths (in the political and socio-economic field ); during harvest</li> </ul>	/				

<b>POLITICAL ACTION</b>	/	/			
• Participate in local and national elections; youth confronting political dynasties; volunteering for NAMFREL and PPCRV – church groups working for clean and honest elections					
• Commitment to transformation of life “especially in the field of economics and politics”	/				
• Political consciousness-raising	/				
<b>INCULTURATION</b>	/				
• the use of cultural expressions, esp. the titles for addressing members of the family (mano/ang, agkarruba, agkakabian, etc.) to address fellow BEC members, denoting closeness and solidarity					
• “use of the vernacular”, “taking off shoes”, “giving of wai during the sign of peace”;				/	
<b>SOCIAL ACTION</b>	/	/	/		
• Environment care: cleanliness and sanitation, tree planting; waste management, herbal medicine, healthcare; medicine provision; taking the sick to the hospital; building houses; giving free labor; participate in common shramadana (voluntary work)					
• protest and action against prostitution dens;	/				
• women’s participation in organic farming	/				
• tackling poverty and marginalization	/				
<b>OTHERS</b>			/		
• Participate in liturgical services (May devotion, Holy Hour, etc.)					
• “Collective action to right what is wrong and to work on the basis of principles and commitment”	/				
• Reconciliation	/				
• Corporal works of mercy				/	
• Doing good to others is already missionary work					/

**SOME COMMENTS FROM THE THEOLOGIANs**

The theologians’ report also included some observations and challenges for further growth of the Asian BECs that have been surveyed<sup>463</sup>, as follows:

<sup>463</sup> See: Macalinao, especially pages 62-77, 95-99, 143-149.

## **COMMUNION**

- BEC was definitely able to deepen relationships – to one's self, to God, to others/neighbors.
- BECs are definitely grounded in and nourished by the Word of God and Eucharist. However,
  - the Gospel sharing and the liturgies do not lead the community to critique both the culturally-
  - determined text and their own socio-political context because of the emphasis on personal sharing of insights on the Word.
- Community leadership that is shared and empowering is practiced in the BECs. However, this participatory leadership does not appear to have transferred to or affected the central parish/diocesan styles of leadership.
- Closer family ties but family situations and issues have not been addressed and responded to.
- Most of the efforts in BECs have concentrated on community-building and less on mission.

## **MISSION**

- Mission is understood as doing something good to other people, a matter of witnessing
- The social dimension, particularly responding to the structural issues and problems, are not yet within the main concerns of the BECs
- Mission is done by individual members, not by an BECs as a whole
- Dialogue with the Poor (Justice):
  - Although reaching out to neighbors have been mentioned in all the reports, reaching out to the 'poor' was not explicitly mentioned;
  - Although 'sin' has been mentioned, there was no mention of sinful structures;

- Political action is mentioned only in the diocese in the Philippines and India maybe because of a more democratic environment
- Dialogue with Cultures (Inculturation)
  - A seemingly surface-level inculturation (some cultural expressions were used as well as some community rituals were collectively participated in)
  - There was no mention in the reports about reaching out and ministry to, or integrating and networking with the marginalized (indigenous tribes, untouchables, women, etc.) in their respective areas
- Dialogue with Religions (Interreligious Harmony)
  - Most of what have been shared refer to socialization (attending celebrations, feast days, burials); very little have been shared on common actions of solidarity or common learning of each other's religious traditions, etc.

### **Part 3: Affirmations, Challenges and Possibilities**

#### **1. UNDERSTANDING OF CHURCH AND ITS MISSION**

##### **a. Church as Local**

From above survey results, the most important contribution of BECs is a shift in the understanding of church. BECs have showcased the conciliar idea of church as 'people of God', very different from a concept of church as a hierarchical institution. As believers gather in their own daily life settings, reflect on the Bible and respond to the social issues that confront them prodded and guided by the Word of God, BECs make 'church' happen.

The BECs have somehow given face to the goal of the FABC, from its very inception, that “the church in Asia would be local and inculturated”. For FABC, inculturation is simply the self-realization of the local church<sup>464</sup>. A BEC, as a local faith community, realizes itself as it is grounded on a particular culture and context and lives its faith life and mission in that particular daily life-setting. This culture and context, in the case of Asia, is necessarily multi-religious, as well as socio-culturally and politically diverse. And therefore the self-realization of the local church inherently involves what has been called Asian Church’s ‘triple dialogue’.

“In Asia, the local church realizes itself by entering into new relationships with neighbors of other faiths and by involving itself in concerns of justice, human dignity and human rights, and in concrete fulfillment of the preferential love for the poor; also by effectively responding to the challenges of new historical forces”<sup>465</sup>.

However, the results of the survey also show that the BECs did not significantly measure up to the church of dialogue that FABC envisions. Minimal, or perhaps initial, efforts have been extended by the BECs surveyed in terms of building up dialogue with cultures, with other religious traditions, and with the poor and marginalized.

What could be some reasons for seeming lack of efforts in these areas? Below are two ideas to *initially* and in a *limited* way respond to this question: through the **church model** appropriated and the **formation approaches** used in BECs surveyed. A discussion on church leadership structures and socio-cultural-political analysis could have added more insights to respond to this question but this is outside the scope of this paper and therefore a limitation.

#### **b. The Challenge and Critique of Church Models**

The Church, even from New Testament times, has been imaged through different models. Vatican II has left us with powerful images of church as the ‘people of God’ and as a ‘pilgrim people’. Church as ‘communion’ is a postconciliar development. These models or metaphors do not and cannot fully describe the reality that is church at that particular time but they emphasize a way of being church.

<sup>464</sup> Gnanapiragasam, 36.

<sup>465</sup> Ibid. 54, 57.

However, models are important because the way we look at reality also shapes the way we respond to it.<sup>466</sup>

When one peruses the church model used by BECs surveyed, mainly articulated through the AsIPA or Lumko materials used for its formation, the native model of church envisioned by FABC – the local church in dialogue with the poor, religions and cultures – is **not** the model of church promoted. Instead, the image of church used and popularized is the church as a ‘communion’, a ‘communion of communities’<sup>467</sup>. These images are not in opposition to one another (especially as seen in Church and BEC teachings), however, one model (reception of one model) would emphasize some areas and be limited in other areas.

The model of church as **communion** has emphasized relationships at different levels of church life (communion with God, family, others; communion at the level of neighborhood, chapels, church organizations, parish, diocese, universal church). Survey results have shown that indeed the BECs have developed and grown depths of relationships in the different levels of communion.

However, could this model (reception of this model) have limited BECs in the way it views and lives ‘communion and mission’, especially in the areas of dialogue with the poor, with religions and with cultures? Because this model has emphasized inner church communion, perhaps it has deemphasized (unintentionally) reaching out to the ‘other’ (the marginalized, other religious traditions, disadvantaged and poor, government and peoples’ organizations, etc). Indeed, this ‘communion’ model of church has been critiqued as inward-looking and self-absorbed.<sup>468</sup>

Below are brief explorations of two different church models that could also give and strengthen even more the possibilities of a church

<sup>466</sup> McFague, S., *Metaphorical Theology, Models of God in Religious Language*, London 1983.

<sup>467</sup> FABC V, # 8. This vision – a Communion of Communities - is written at the back of all AsIPA texts and is also the church vision promoted by Lumko Pastoral Institute in South Africa; see their foundational material on church vision – ‘Towards a Community Church: The Way Ahead for Today’s Parish’.

<sup>468</sup> Phan, P., *Cultures, Religions, and Mission in Asian Catholic Theologies*, *Japan Mission Journal*, 2009, 37-53.

responsive to the challenge of **dialogue** which is the thread that binds the definition and mission of a local church in Asian perspective.

### *Reimagining Church*

#### *a. as Servant-Sacrament of Harmony*<sup>469</sup>

In 1995, the FABC-Office for Theological Concerns came out with a comprehensive presentation of the Theology of Harmony has been explored in Asia for almost two decades. In exploring the Asian concept of harmony, it delved into the resources of Asian primal/cosmic religions, as well as Hindu, Buddhist, Islam and Chinese (Confucianism, Daoism, and Chan Buddhism) religious traditions, and from the Christian Scriptures.

The document affirms that God's spirit is at work beyond Christian communities, in whatever is good and true<sup>470</sup> in other religions and religious traditions and that "openness to the Spirit present there will greatly enrich our own lives of faith"<sup>471</sup> This document reminds Asian Christians that they cannot do the work of restoring harmony by themselves and that they can accomplish it by way of triple dialogue. This theology of harmony becomes the Asian churches' energy for collaboration with other religious traditions and governmental as well as civic groups working for social change in Asian contexts.<sup>472</sup>

In conclusion, the document calls for a development of a 'cosmic Christology of harmony,' saying that only by basing itself on such a Christology will the theology of the Church go beyond its institutional concerns to understand church essentially as a centrifugal church, open to the whole universe and present in and for the universe.<sup>473</sup>

<sup>469</sup> Also called 'dialogical ecclesiology' or ecclesiology of harmony by Phan, *ibid.*

<sup>470</sup> FABC II, NA 2, LG 16.

<sup>471</sup> Eilers, F.J., (ed.), *For All the Peoples of Asia*, FABC Documents 1992-1996, Quezon City, 1997, 278.

<sup>472</sup> Eilers, F.J., (ed.), *For All the Peoples of Asia*, FABC Documents 1992-1996, Quezon City 1997, 292.

<sup>473</sup> Eilers, *For All*, 294.

**b. as 'Bridge of Solidarity'**

Filipino theologian A. Brazal, responding to BEC reports from different parts of Asia in an Asian BEC Meeting in 2011, challenged BECs to extend beyond inward communion by presenting an image of BECs as 'bridges of solidarity'<sup>474</sup>. For Brazal, 'bridges' symbolically facilitate the crossing of geographical, social, economic, political, cultural and religious divisions. Bridges therefore function both as site and as means or medium for social groups separated by a divide to meet.

Brazal, sourcing from *Solicitudo Rei Socialis* (SRS), contends that 'solidarity' refers to a firm commitment to the common good of all individuals and various groups. This call, she noted, is based on the fact of our interdependence and our sharing a bond of common origin (SRS #33).

Furthermore, Brazal notes that for John Paul II, solidarity is the virtue needed to overcome structures of sin (SRS 40). Solidarity helps us move toward collaboration (SRS #39.8)

with other faiths/religions, governments, NGOs, etc. because of our mutual interest. For Brazal, solidarity finds its ultimate inspiration from our being images of the Triune God (SRS #40.3), 'the primordial Solidarity of divine Others'<sup>475</sup> which is also the model of a community where equality, difference, mutuality, fecundity and unity are simultaneously recognized and affirmed.

With the image or model of Church as a Bridge of Solidarity, Brazal explored BECs as a site of solidarity among and with the poor and the marginalized. The BECs can also be in solidarity with other Catholic groups in a parish/diocesan setting, as well as to work in solidarity with other faiths/faith traditions and government and non-governmental organizations.

<sup>474</sup> Brazal, A., BECs in the Late Modern World, Church as Bridge of Solidarity, a paper presented at the BEC Asian Meeting held from Sept. 2-5, 2011 in: One World Center, Taipei, Taiwan.

<sup>475</sup> K. Min, A., *The Solidarity of Others in a Divided World, A Postmodern Theology after Postmodernism*, New York 2004.

### ***c. The Possibilities of Basic Human Communities (BHCs)***

Arising from a BEC experience, BHCs have been part of Asia's theological reflections the past two decades. BHCs would be a gathering of neighbors belonging to different religious traditions and could possibly be joined also with local government and civic groups existing in a neighborhood setting. Basically following a dialogue of daily life, they could participate in each others' religious celebrations or traditional folk rituals, and most especially cooperate and work together towards common community concerns involving economic, political and social issues to improve their life conditions. Sharing of spiritual experiences are also possibilities in BHCs.

The Catholic Church in India has been exploring the possibilities for BHCs. In an all-India survey, it was opined that BECs should be moving towards BHCs "because of the religious divide that is growing in the country."<sup>476</sup>

Existing in multi-religious and multi-cultural settings, the Catholic church in Asia could support the forming of BHCs which promote the value of respect in the midst of difference, cooperation towards common goals of justice, peace and integrity of creation, and compassion for all.

## **2. BUILDING UP THE FAITH**

### **a. Co-responsibility in Faith Formation**

With BECs, believers have taken responsibility for their own faith formation and life of discipleship through Bible sharing and other formation and prayer activities done regularly. Ordinarily, when one talks about faith formation, one only thinks of the regular Sunday worship as a way of being formed into the faith, aside from the short catechetical lessons before sacramental celebrations or undergone by those who went to catholic schools. The small percentage of the baptized who belongs to Church organizations would also receive faith

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<sup>476</sup> Penha, B., Through Human Communities to National Integration – an all – India Survey Assesses the Strength and Problems of SCCs in India, *The New Leader*, May 1-15, 2003, 12, cited by: Diaz, J., in a paper entitled "Small Christian Communities and Interreligious Dialogue – Small Human Communities" presented at the SCC Theological Congress in Nagpur, India from August 17-19, 2011.

formation during their organization meetings. Faith formation then largely depended on the priest or the catechist or the group leader.

More importantly, in BECs, the approach to faith formation has changed – from knowledge as imparted by those ‘who know’ to knowledge as gleaned from life’s experiences. BECs have transformed the understanding of formation as an input given by ‘experts’ (priests, religious and catechists) to faith formation as a collective reflection and discernment based on one’s life experiences and leads to improving collective lives.

### **b. The Critique and Challenge of Formation Approaches**

However, one comment from one theologian who did the survey: the bible sharing

methods the BECs were using did not provide them with a critical eye to look into the culture of the world that made the Scriptures and also into the world that surrounds them at present. Another theologian said, although there was a high degree of awareness of personal sin, there was no discussion of social or structural sin. The formation the BECs have undergone (bible sharing and awareness sessions) were perhaps mostly directed to growth in one’s personal life of discipleship or simply awareness-raising that did not always flow into an action-response to the different challenges the BECs were facing in their social locations.

Definitely, the limitation of a church ‘communion’ model has also affected the formation of the BECs. Although communion and mission are intricately connected, the growth in community relationships, as well as personal life of discipleship, did not naturally translate into growth in action response towards the mission of evangelization through the triple dialogue mode.

### **Formation in Dialogue**

Dialogue is also a formation approach that could be utilized in the faith formation of BECs. As God also manifests Gods’ self in the dialogue partners (the poor, the religions, the cultures), dialogue then is a very humble listening and learning approach to faith formation in the Asian context.

In terms of formation as dialogue, especially with the poor and marginalized (aside from interreligious dialogue), Asian liberation theologies - particularly of the *dalits* of India or the *minjungs* of Korea - have apparently not been utilized in BEC formation. The theologies of women, as well as of indigenous peoples and communities all over Asia, have seemingly not been explored as well in BEC formation programs of those surveyed.<sup>477</sup>

### c. The Possibilities of Building up the *Sensus Fidelium* through BECs

The faith life of the BECs is a concrete way to build up the *sensus fidelium* which has a very important teaching/formation role in the Church.<sup>478</sup> The BECs can provide the space for building up this sense of faith more consciously through the Christian formation they undergo (their regular meetings, Bible sharing, formation seminars, worship and celebrations, ministries and services). Their use of the bible and church teachings, as well as their local folk teachings, customs and rituals, builds up their collective faith wisdom (*sensus fidelium*) which guide the BECs to make a stand or walk new paths as they face varied and changing environments and their attendant life issues.<sup>479</sup>

The *sensus fidelium* contains the life of faith of a local church. Through the *sensus fidelium* built up in BECs, the traditional teachings of the Church are engaged in dialogue with the 'signs of the times' and guide a faith response to the life issues of the contexts the BECs find themselves in. The *sensus fidelium* of the BECs therefore contextualize / inculturate the Christian Tradition and sustains it for the next generation<sup>480</sup>.

<sup>477</sup> For Asian liberation theologies, check out the writings of Sri Lankan theologians Fr. Aloysius Pieris SJ and Fr. Tissa Balasuriya OMI. For women's perspective in faith life and mission, check out the work of Ecclesia of Women in Asia. India and the Philippines would have much literature on tribal or indigenous peoples' theologies.

<sup>478</sup> LG 12. BECs and *Sensus Fidelium* is a popular exploration in recent Asian BEC theological conferences. Fr. Thomas Vijay of the AsIPA Team and Mr. Elvic Colaco of Bombay have presented papers on BECs and *Sensus Fidelium* during the SCC Theological Congress held in Nagpur, India last Aug. 17-19, 2011. In the Philippines, theologian Emmanuel de Guzman has written extensively also on this topic.

<sup>479</sup> Guzman, E. de, Exploring the Terrain of *Sensus Fidelium* among 'Root -Crops' Christians, in: MST Review 6, no. 2 (2004), 1-75.

<sup>480</sup> Crowley, P., Catholicity, Inculturation and Newman's *Sensus Fidelium*, Heythrop

**CONCLUDING NOTE**

Considering the affirmations, and weighing the challenges as well as the possibilities that BECs have opened up in Asia, we can see why it has been called a ‘new way of being church’, an “instrument for formation and evangelization” and „a solid starting point for a new society based on a civilization of love”<sup>481</sup>.

# **The Visions of Ministry of the Small Christian Communities**



# The Pastoral Vision of Basic Christian Communities / Ecclesial Communities

Pius Rutechura

It is from the early Church tradition of gathering to be nourished by the apostle's instruction, pastoral vision of Basic Christian/Ecclesial Communities. The foundations of the pastoral vision of Small Christian Communities has something to do with contextual theological approach which is nourished by concrete experiences and by the life of faith of people. Dialogue between the praxis of contemporary human beings, the Gospel and the Christian tradition has led to transforming human actions and ways of relating. Small Christian Communities serve the purpose of responding to the call of loving God and the neighbor on foundations that transcend mere natural solidarity. Within the past five decades, in their various levels of manifestations as per the richness of vocabulary: comunidades de base, basic ecclesial communities, intentional communities, Small Christian Communities were inspired by the ecclesiology of the Second Vatican II (See Joseph Healey, Small Christian Communities Global Collaborative Website ([www.cngs.com](http://www.cngs.com))). They emerged from lived experiences of people in the context of families, local church communities or parishes, as starting points of theological reflection. This paper basically draws from the African perspectives within the AMECEA Countries where back in 1976, it was resolved to make Small Christian Communities a pastoral option of being Church in the region<sup>482</sup>.

## Foundations of the Pastoral Vision

Of the major pastoral dimensions of the pastoral acts of the Church, i.e., proclamation of the word (kerygma), teaching (didache);

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<sup>482</sup> The writer of this Article served the AMECEA region as Secretary General 2005-2011.

symbols and rituals (leiturgia); pastoral care and social commitment (diakonia) and identity and community (koinonia), Small Christian Communities observing from the African Church perspectives have influenced mainly the diakonia and koinonia aspects.

Koinonia has much to do with identity and community. The concept koinonia contains as it were the kerygma, the leiturgia and the diakonia. It is the building of community (koinonia) which keeps the other dimensions in balance. Koinonia distinguishes a people promoting Church community from just sectarian groups and contributes to an authentic Christian identity, in which knowledge, celebration and commitment are closely linked together. Koinonia implies the dialogue between Church and world as an essential element of it.

Several scholars and practitioners of Small Christian Communities agree that Small Christian Communities are not a mere pastoral strategy but a communion of communities, a way of being Church Family of God. I concur very much with a view that Small Christian Communities have contributed to giving birth to a Church that is communion, a people seeking to be in communion with the Triune God, a communion of participatory faith-communities<sup>483</sup>. Several dimensions have emerged from the pastoral vision of Small Christian Communities that prioritize koinonia.

As a matter of fact, faith is a treasure which is enriched by being shared (Catechism of the Catholic Church 949). The Koinonia aspect of being Church: Small Christian Communities are defined and marked by the aspect of mutual sharing of prayer, meal (sustenance) and wisdom. The household church is incomplete without nurturing and exploring the pastoral vision of a people committed for a common purpose of living and witnessing gospel values to the various aspects of life. Proactively responding to the needs of people in community.

### **Emerging Features of the Pastoral Vision**

In sequence of importance, Small Christian Communities have broadened parameters of Diaconia both in terms of Care and

<sup>483</sup> See: O'Halloran, J., *Small Christian Communities, Vision and Practicalities*, St Pauls 2002; Quevedo, O., *The Basic Ecclesial Community as a Church Model for Asia at:* <http://www.ucanews.com/html/fabc-papers/fabc-92i.htm>.

Social Commitment. Small Christian Communities have led to a way of being church whereby formation with regard to the caring, servicing and social acting of the Church are defined in modes of relating and being to each other. This being and acting is addressed to both fields inside and outside the Church. Social welfare work implies both the individual pastoral care (poimenics) and pastoral care with groups and the reflection on the social acting of the Church. In this diakonia, there are some focus areas: day to day mutual support: prayers, care for the sick, provision of basic needs of life such as food, clothing and shelter; pastoral care of the sick, of children and orphans, of people with disabilities, elderly persons; pastoral care in the context of poverty, Pastoral care of marriage and families, pastoral care for youth and schools, Social organisations of the Church.

These are some of the key features that have emerged from prioritizing Koinonia and Diakonia in approaching the building of Small Christian Communities. From experience, some of these features pose challenges that need call for appropriate solutions so as to make the pastoral vision of these communities more effective.

### **Church of the Neighbourhood: Identity and Bonding**

Titus Amigu rightfully makes an important point from the Tanzanian perspective that Small Christian Communities within the pastoral option of the AMECEA Bishops, squared with the vision of extension or perfection of neighbourliness. This neighbourhood is the immediate context and field which can be rightly termed nurturing the Church of the neighbourhood. Thus, witnessing to Christ's love through Small Christian Communities was meant to be an act of living the Christian commitment of love, cementing the bonds of belonging and togetherness.

It is within the koinonia perspective that Small Christian Communities have provided a forum of opening up gates to welcome the neighbour, being a means of bridging differences and social strata in the day to day social living, economic status and varied cultural backgrounds. These communities serve the purpose of providing a way of being as church of the neighbourhood with a call to help, share and witness; indeed a way of being and living a Christology and an

Ecclesiology of communion at parish and diocesan levels, creating active participation and sharing<sup>484</sup>. It can be rightly concluded that Small Christian Communities have provided a more profound way of evangelization that is participatory, sharing and witnessing in nature.

In this way, Small Christian communities have led to new ways of building Christian identity and a sense of belonging and bonding. There is the power behind the names in Small Christian Communities. Names mostly drawn from saints, shape both the identity and a sense of belonging. The building of small Christian communities reflect the identity within the neighbourhood, parish and even leadership. Names define what the community stands for in terms of values, bonding and activities that are carried out up to the parish and even diocesan levels. It is a strong wish and recommendation that hopefully there could be more catechisis on emulating the virtues of particular patron saints at various levels of witnessing Christian faith by community members.

### **Pastoral Governance Tool at Grassroots**

Small Christian Communities have provided an effective grassroots tool of parish restructuring and governance. Where effectively embraced and guided, these communities have provided the administrative structure of the Church which at times has become obligatory in terms of accessing services of the church. Positively this has led to providing collaborative leadership that effectively engage grassroots levels, whereby laity leadership is nurtured and elected from grassroots up to parish, diocesan and national levels!

However, I maintain the view that there is need for striking an appropriate balance by nurturing right attitudes in terms of methodological and pedagogical approaches both for adherents and leaders in these communities. Rather than embracing them as compulsive or cohesive, these communities must be viewed as moments of grace and mutual growth by practitioners who are both convinced and committed. Essential to the development of an evangelizing community is nurturing leadership and accepting responsibilities

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<sup>484</sup> See: Amigu, T./ Ndogo Ndogo, J., Small Christian Communities in Tanzania, <http://www.c-b-t.org>; Same idea is confirmed by Cieslikiewicz, C., in: Pastoral Involvement of Parish Based SCCs in Dar es Salaam, Healey, J./Hinton, J., Small Christian Communities Today, New York 2005, 99-105.

within the spirit of enhancing stewardship of God's Kingdom. This calls for full collaboration between the clergy, religious and the laity. Similarly, these communities must empower God's family to share gifts and form life giving and transformative modes of being and witnessing to Gospel values. As a matter of fact, these communities must provide both a modality and an atmosphere/ambiance of being Church in which the ordinary faithful interact and connect their faith and life.

### **Vivification of the Ecclesiology of Church-Family of God**

In several dioceses where SCCS have been prioritized, they have become an important organ of strengthening evangelization at the grassroots levels with a practical touch of manifesting the ecclesiology of Church Family of God. As spelled out in *Ecclesia in Africa*, the concept of Church-family of God was meant to instill values of rejoicing in and respect for life, solidarity and community life. The concept of Church-Family of God pointed to the direction of being acceptable and at home within the community of believers (EA 43). As Kieran Flynn rightly points out, these communities have taken on a new relevance in the light of the understanding of the Church-as-Family model in Africa. Whereas within the AMECEA countries, SCCs had previously been introduced as a pastoral priority for the Church in determining its autonomy and emerging pastoral identity, presently the role of SCCs is envisioned in the understanding of the Church-as Family in Africa. It is in being transforming communities that SCCs realize their identity in the Church-as-Family model. These individual Church-as Family have the task of working to transform society<sup>485</sup>.

Small Christian Communities are a chance of broadening family ties, a new moment of living and being Church and neighbor, broadening and deepening networking to an extent of overcoming fears and ethnic/tribal, or divides along wealth lines. However, it should be noted that the traditional African family faces several threats which tend to make it dysfunctional and at times being plagued by disease, hunger, poverty and ignorance, traditions that segregate, alienate and even ostracize. It is in here that Small Christian Communities are

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<sup>485</sup> Kieran, F., *Communities for the Kingdom*, AMECEA, Spearhead Nos 181-182 (98-99).

challenged to be nucleus of rectifying the image of the Church Family of God and preserve its true dignity. Without going into details, it is worthy noting that the two Apostolic Exhortations on the Special Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops point to the importance of safeguarding as well as healing the Church Family of God within the various African contexts.

### **A Seedbed of Inculturating the Gospel and Healing Wounds of Division**

The first African Synod affirmed that „a serious concern for a true and balanced inculturation is necessary in order to avoid cultural confusion and alienation in our fast-evolving society.“<sup>486</sup> Africans are challenged to look inside themselves, nurture and emulate values that correspond to the best of their traditions and their Christian faith. Genuine freedom was to come from with inculturation. Africans are encouraged to overcome the fears of embracing their traditional values while embracing Christianity. It is through inculturation of the Gospel that dichotomous modes of living can be overcome, paving way for authentic living as truly Africans and truly Christians.

It was rightly indicated that Small Christian communities are venues for transforming humanity from within and making it new. Small Christian communities provide an opportunity in and through the only Son the relations of people with God, one another and all creation will be renewed. For this reason the proclamation of the Gospel can contribute to the interior transformation of all people of good will whose hearts are open to the Holy Spirit's action.

Indeed, working towards restoring hope in Africa calls for bridging faith gaps and purification and expiation of consciences and cultures. This can be better accomplished at Small Christian Communities levels. Africa still needs more directing of efforts towards developing a personal relationship with Christ. For example, within the AMECEA region situations, it has been emphasized that there is need for inculturating forgiveness and reconciliation. In war-torn areas and perpetual conflict areas, there is need for instilling values that would replace hatred, revenge, division with common good ideals . For people who have fresh emotional scars and are still traumatized by inflicted

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<sup>486</sup> EA 48.

sufferings and losses, there is need for healing processes and intensive programs of renewal, whereby reconciliation and forgiveness skills are combined with counseling and addressing issues related to justice.

To effectively respond to spiritual needs as intentional groups, there is need for fostering ministries as per directives of the Church. As was pointed out in recent times, the Church in Africa needs reconcilers and peace makers, care givers and counsellors. Nurturing ministries to respond to various challenges such as HIV/AIDS, witchcraft and violence leaves out much desired in existing ecclesial communities in the greater part of Africa.

To remain truly in unity with the Church as true expressions of communion and means of constructing more profound relevant communion, there is need for nurturing ministries as per guidelines of the Church. Good examples in Zambia and Uganda, in face of HIV/AIDS challenges of ministering to both the affected and infected, ministries of care givers and counsellors have been developed. These can be emulated elsewhere.

## Conclusion

The pastoral vision of Small Christian Communities can be better understood as a new sign of vitality and synergy at grassroots within the Church, a valuable instrument of formation and evangelization, indeed one of the most effective ways for nurturing a new society based on a civilization of love. What is expressed in *Redemptoris Missio*, No. 51 stands valid. These communities are “signs of vitality within the Church, an instrument of formation and evangelization and a solid starting point for a new society based on a civilization of love. They give possibility for all the baptized in church life and mission in their own areas<sup>487</sup>. It is not enough to passionately talk about SCCs or even to value them in terms of providing basic structures for pastoral administrative purposes. There is urgent need for revisiting their relevance and impact at various levels. “Small Christian Communities continue to be the nucleus of evangelization. The whole family of God needs to be trained, motivated and empowered for evangelization each according to his or her specific role within the Church<sup>488</sup>.

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<sup>487</sup> RM 51.

<sup>488</sup> McGarry, C., *Small Christian Communities*, in: *African Ecclesial Review* 41 (1999),



# The Vision of Ministry of the Ecclesial Base Communities in Latin America and the Caribbean

Socorro Martínez Maqueo

In April 2011 we met in Santiago de Chile for the annual meeting of the advisors to ecclesial base communities in Latin America and the Caribbean. This was particularly fruitful in deepening and clarifying our identity and mission. The following article is based on that collective reflection, a reflection also nourished by the contributions of people from other continents.

## Discerning the signs of the times

The vision of ministry that prevails in Ecclesiastical Base Communities (*Comunidades Eclesiales de Base*, CEBs) is much concerned with discerning the signs of the times and responding to them. Today we live in a globalized world and a market culture that is not limited to the economic sphere but also invades the cultural and even spiritual levels, as it seeks to permeate people's desires, feelings and behaviours.<sup>489</sup>

Despite the efforts made in certain Latin American countries, there is still a profound gulf between the social classes, wealth being concentrated in the hands of a few. Harrowing poverty and unconscionable opulence exist side by side.

Latin America finds itself caught in a dynamic whereby its natural resources are extracted by great transnational corporations, to the ecological, cultural and economic detriment of our peoples.

Religious movements proliferate that appeal to the sensibility but not to the heart and, therefore, do not take up the quest for justice.

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4-6, 2000.

<sup>489</sup> See Jas 1:14.

The fortitude of the indigenous, peasant and neighbourhood communities has been a force in Latin America, but this wisdom is threatened by neo-liberalism. To resist the destruction of community ties is to promote the life and the true wealth of our peoples.

Here, I will delineate some distinctive features of the CEBs' vision of ministry that situate it within the current context.

### **Bearers of Good News**

The CEBs are bearers of Good News; that is their mission. The CEBs are also tremendously fragile, a defenceless flower, as Carlos Mesters called them. But strength resides in their fragility. This accords with the mysterious ways of a God who took flesh in the frailness of a child.

At this level of the Church, meeting in houses, chapels or in the shade of a tree, they feel they have been sent to proclaim the love of God from the place of the "little people," of those who are not recognized by the world, who might be compared to tiny grains of salt that dissolve and give savour to everyday life. God makes himself present, and though they make no fuss about it, no loud proclamation of their wonder and hope, the people of the CEBs are conscious of the worth conferred upon them. A space without exclusions where there is room for all, where gifts and the knowledge of all count for the same and are freely shared. There are people who have never been asked what they think, what they want, and to be able to express this is Good News: I am worth something, I exist, I count. The world of today still needs to find out that each of us has a place, that we all of us count, we all of us know, that we appreciate and value each other, that we have something to say and things to do.

We take ourselves to be like the yeast in the dough (*Matt 13:33*), which works almost without being noticed, though not by virtue of our own merits, but through the Grace of God. The CEBs' presence in the neighbourhoods is often weak and tenuous, but where it exists, it makes a difference. What they do and experience is expressed in few words, for the poor are people of actions rather than words. The CEBs live their essence spontaneously, in the simplicity that is God's gift to the poor, and he enables their efforts to bear fruit.

## Missionary CEBs

It is their relish in knowing themselves to be worthy sons and daughters of God that gives rise to the missionary impulse. This experience that nourishes the whole of their life has to be communicated to everyone else.

The vocation and mission of the CEBs is to be disciples, witnesses to the power of the Gospel, of Jesus' project, and on this basis to form a community. There is striking testimony from all over the continent: María, a poor woman from the Tehuantepec isthmus, who day after day strove to contribute to the family budget by making *totopo*, a kind of tortilla, and never had any time to do anything else. One day, after repeated invitations to visit the base community, she decided she would go, for despite her efforts every day her life was not improving. María's life changed radically as a result, as did that of her family and her neighbours: she learned to read with the Bible, her family and neighbours participated in meetings and actions. María became a tireless missionary for the formation of communities, to such an extent that she has become known as the "little Paul" of the village and its surrounding farms. Or there is Moyitz in Haiti, in the parish of Kazal, beautifully organized into CEBs. Poor and without family, Moyitz discovered his worth in a community and this inner wellbeing impelled him to bring the Good News to others. He has developed into a tireless missionary who pays special attention to the participation of children.

What motivates is vital experience, the certainty of having discovered the pearl of great price. It is in mission, in journeying and in giving and receiving that the CEBs learn. Today, poverty in the cities of Latin America and the Caribbean has new faces and there is a latent demand for the Good News, challenging the people of God to bring Jesus' project to life among the poor.

## The CEBs are a process and a way of being Church in permanent development

The ecclesio genesis discussed in the 1970s and 1980s<sup>490</sup> has suffered many vicissitudes, but the process continues to seek its way

<sup>490</sup> See Boff, L., *The Base Communities Reinvent the Church*, New York 1986.

amid many difficulties. The CEBs are not finished products that have achieved full perfection, but are in permanent construction. They are a church in progress that begins from the community, witnessing to what is possible. We are entirely aware that this way of being Church is far from being accepted and practiced in the majority of parishes and that many people think its day is past. However, like the early Christian communities, the CEBs are dogged.

Their roots go back millennia to those early Christian communities, on whose mysticism and spirituality they draw, seeking to give them a form appropriate to the world of today, without the latter overwhelming it and robbing it of its counter-cultural essence. Sometimes it might seem as if they are waning, that there are too many obstacles to overcome, even from the Church itself, which looks at them with suspicion, yet they go forward like the defenceless flower that shows itself to be vulnerable, flexible, unrigid. It is Jesus' project for his people that guides them and lights their way; and when they lose sight of this, their identity finds itself weakened, lost in unimportant rules and structures.

A sister who recently visited a community in a parish that for years had supported the CEBs and then abandoned them following a change of priest commented as follows:

“When I visited a community that had emerged in the 1970s someone said, ‘I think that was an experience that can’t be repeated.’ But when I think about what I saw and heard in those days, I don’t believe that’s the case. They repeated day after day the experience of the Kingdom of God. They lived it in their work, in love of their children, in fidelity to the Church. They remained communities that built life in a context that suddenly turned violent. One member is now preparing, together with his wife, for ordination as a permanent deacon, now that he is retiring. Another woman is the manager of the shop at the secondary school, and from there she offers support and encouragement to the young people of the neighbourhood. Others are catechists. All are witnesses to God’s tender and faithful love.”

The CEBs represent a way of being Church in which the whole essence of the Church is rethought and restructured, reconfigured in

accordance with priorities grounded in the New Testament revelation and the fundamental orientations of the Latin American and Caribbean Church as laid down at the bishops' conferences. Efforts are always being made to identify the CEBs with something they aren't. The way the CEBs figure in certain passages of the Final Document of the Aparecida Conference in 2007 shows that some thought of them as simply one movement among others, speaking of unidentified and undefined "small communities" and finishing after arduous discussion by granting them a place in the sacramental life of the Church as one level of the Church itself and one mode of being Church.

What enthusiasm one finds in those parishes that really are a network of communities! More than once, having gone with others to Mass in some unknown place and having left feeling happy and renewed by it, they have remarked, "They have CEBs here, don't they?", and yes, they did indeed. The parishes that understand this way of being Church give relish to all their activities. It's not that everyone is in a CEB, and that's even less the case in parishes that cover a wide territory or are responsible for a larger parishioner population, running to thousands. However, they make their mark on style, rhythm and perspective, on the services, the sacraments and the hymns, on everything to do with mission, and on the organisation that is intended to serve the mission that Jesus Christ entrusted to us. Being the first level of the Church, their vision of ministry leads them to seek to form networks of communities within the parishes, always with a view to being a light to the community, the yeast in the dough (Matthew 5:13-16; 13:33). In this way of being Church each community takes responsibility for its own ministry. Since this is the case, the priests who promote them are grateful for the vitality they bring to the latter's ministry, which helps them concentrate on the essentials of it.

The main function of the CEBs, however, is not to reinforce the parochial structure but to be an organised network. Hence, while vitalizing the parish, they know that they have also been sent by the Spirit to sow the good seed; filled with the life-giving wind, they resist the temptation to rest on their laurels after discovering that they are recognized and valued. More commonly, the CEBs are attacked, persecuted, misunderstood and undervalued. But like the poor who live the Beatitudes they place their trust in God and go on their way

with their eyes on the teachings of Jesus, on the world “turned upside down” that leads to the Kingdom of God, which is their reward and occasion for great joy. The CEBs need a minimum of structure and organisation if they are to be free to proclaim, and to be, the Good News (Matthew 5:1-12, the Beatitudes).

### **A Church of diverse ministries**

Given their vision of ministry, the CEBs tend to develop a whole range of ministries and services. The more, the more dynamic: cantors, celebrants, visitors of the sick, catechists, defenders of human rights, protectors of nature, co-operators, leaders of Christian Family Movement groups, youth leaders, activists in civil society organisations and many more, uniting faith and commitment. Ministry within the CEBs is a team affair, based on the understanding that the CEB itself is a ministerial community.

The CEBs’ engagement is gratuitous and discreet, and its best reward is the life of the community, the tasks accomplished, the relationships strengthened, and the knowledge that one is about the Lord’s business.

The CEBs are active where the organised presence of the parishes does not normally or habitually make itself felt. They enjoy autonomy within communion.

### **Ministry of the Word**

Characteristic of Latin America and the Caribbean is “the prayerful Word,” which combines the encounter with God’s revelation in the Bible with that simple way of understanding the Word as communion with God, with others, with the whole world, as a gift and a responsibility. Hence it does not restrict itself to contemplation, but takes it into life, into action, where it installs the Kingdom of God as the permanent frame of reference, grounding a Christocentric and Trinitarian spirituality.

The Bible is a book that the poor appropriate and make their own. In the countryside it is the sharp machete that allows them to cut a way through the difficulties of life; in urban areas it is the lamp that casts light into the shadows that assail life in their myriad forms.

The daily life of poor neighbourhoods and rural areas becomes the starting point for re-reading God's passage through our history. We encounter God in the powerless and the simple, in family gatherings, in demands for water, land or human rights. The Word is thought, prayed, drunk, contemplated and sung, and it illuminates the emancipatory practice of the communities, lending presence to the Paschal mystery.<sup>491</sup>

### **Ministry of celebration**

In the context of our culture of feast day and festival the CEBs celebrate faith and life in many different ways. We celebrate with dances, drumming and songs of liberation that express the spirituality that moves us.

Our faith expresses the simplicity of our people, its ancestral religiosity and the longing for a new society in which we all have a place.

### **Solidarity – the efficacy and tenderness of the peoples**

A value of permanent importance in the CEBs is solidarity, the rallying to those who need our presence and support. Solidarity is the tenderness and efficacy of the peoples, says the poet and priest Dom Pedro Casaldáliga. The CEBs are known for their solidarity, for joining in the righteous struggles of organised groups claiming their right to a life of dignity. This they have done across Latin America and the Caribbean, with peasant fightbacks, rural movements, struggles over minerals, the demands of teachers, and the demand for a planet free of the irrational exploitation of natural resources, for respect for the sacred sites of the indigenous peoples, and with victims of violence, with migrants, with widows.

The CEBs are simple in the way they act, but they are intuitive: they have a nose for how justice and truth are to be sought or initiate actions or join together with larger groups. Of course they make mistakes from time to time and they are exposed to the permanent risk of being used or manipulated. So they constantly endeavour to remain independent in order to be evangelically efficacious. Jesus'

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<sup>491</sup> Personal communication from Fr. Moacyr Grechi, 27 July 2009.

temptation by power is one that stalks us all and it is necessary to recognize it, to explore its profound causes, and to remain consistent. The re-reading of history is a great teacher.

The matter was well put on the occasion of a pilgrimage to San Cristóbal de las Casas in Chiapas by the CEBs of forty dioceses, many years ago: “Look how this wonder comes about. Old things, like the way our Indian peoples have of living the faith, old, enormously old, ancient. Here is a church as old as Isabella, pregnant with light, pregnant with authentic life, impregnated with truth; and here we are being visited by this young experience of the Latin American Church that is the CEBs, which are likewise impregnated, likewise pregnant with light and love and truth and the struggle for justice.”<sup>492</sup>

The CEBs are a *Samaritan Church*: they share in charity; they share in service to people, to society, to humanity. They are a prophetic Church of service, a service to the world, to bring about a world of kindness, in which relations are governed not by violence but by justice.

### **The CEBs' involvement in society**

One of the characteristic features of the CEBs in Latin America and the Caribbean is their involvement in society in a constant effort to unite life and faith.

With their method of “See, Judge, Act, Evaluate and Celebrate” the CEBs have the capacity to concretize in large or small-scale actions the results of their analysis and reflection in the light of the faith. As the African saying has it: “Little people doing little things in little places achieve great changes.”

The CEBs come to enjoy the analysis of reality at its different levels, connecting what they experience at the grassroots, in everyday life, with national and international problems. They reflect as they go along, practising the art of analysis, of identifying the causes, and also identifying the forces and resources on which they will rely in confronting the problem or in seeking alternatives together with others.

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<sup>492</sup> Oscar Salinas, pastoral vicar of the Diocese of San Cristóbal de las Casas.

## Citizen participation

One aspect of the CEBs' social involvement is the citizen participation so necessary in our countries, where democracy has gained such an uncertain foothold. This is furthered in the everyday practice of the CEBs, through simple but significant measures:

- Equality without regard to sex or academic qualifications.
- A variety of roles providing services for the common good.
- Election to the various roles and rotation of the same.
- Analysis of needs with a view to action to meet them.

## Women in the CEBs

The fact that women are a majority in the CEBs is not the result of a pastoral decision taken in advance or of any vision prioritizing one matter over another. The women simply responded to Jesus' invitation. They asked, "Lord, where do you live?" He answered, "Come and see," and they stayed and made the place their own.

With time it has become clear what a good thing, what a gift the CEBs have been for women, and women for the CEBs.

There are a number of paragraphs about women in the Aparecida Document, some of them better than others: "At this time in Latin America and the Caribbean, the so often silenced cry of women who are subjected to many forms of exclusion and violence in all their forms and at all stages of their lives must be heard. Among them, poor, indigenous and Afro-American women have endured double marginalization. All women must be able to participate fully in ecclesial, family, cultural, social and economic life with the creation of spaces and structures to foster greater inclusion".<sup>493</sup>

In the CEBs poor women develop their skills and grow in self-esteem, overcoming fears and anxieties and making an enormous effort to advance themselves, conscious of the extra burden imposed by life in marginal neighbourhoods.

The principle of equality rules in the CEBs and is a crucial element of democracy. An equality defined by justice and not by similarity.

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<sup>493</sup> CELAM, Concluding Document, Aparecida, Bogotá 2008, No. 454.

Women's equality is central to the model and to the vision of ministry, excluding no-one but emphasizing the role of those who for years have been relegated to second-class status in both society and the Church.

### **Testimony by Lorette Moncoeur, Port-au-Prince, Haiti**

"I have been involved in the communities; I have belonged to this family, since 1980. That day we read Acts 4:32-37. There and then I pledged to prepare myself to live with them, and that day I felt a gust of hope blow through me and learned ways of sharing that I knew nothing of. Above all, [I learned] to share what I had with my brothers and sisters in need. This little Word stayed in my heart from then until today.

Each week in the Community we share our troubles and joys. There is an atmosphere full of joy at what God tells us in his Word. We share the Word and we bring some small thing with us to share it with the others.

My community became a little school where we learned to live as sister or brother with other people. I learned to live as a person; I learned how to think about my country's problems, about the Church and about many experiences that I knew nothing of until I joined the CEB.

In the community I educated myself for life and I am very happy, for it is in that small community that I have had my most important experiences as a person, as a woman. Thank you."

### **Training – a cross-cutting dimension**

Training, whether systematic or otherwise, is a priority that gives the CEBs a clearer idea of their identity in terms of the historic periods in which they find themselves. Faced with the tasks of the Kingdom, the CEBs feel the need to set their life and their activity on firm foundations. The most important agency of training is the community itself: if relationships are formed there, the CEB endures, becoming a point of reference. The communities additionally benefit from workshops, courses and the knowledge of qualified professionals, a benefit which they in turn pass on to others. Following the example of Jesus, learning is a permanent aspect of the life of the communities.

## Inter-organisation

At the heart of this diversity there is a single proposition, a course, a direction, to which we give expression in different kinds of organising at the levels of region, country and continent. These networks or meetings are spaces for getting together and planning. They help in the identification of new angles and dimensions.

Here an important role is played by meetings between the communities themselves that take place at different levels, in the parish, the diocese, the region, the country and the continent.

These encounters provide the setting for an exchange of experiences amongst the organized and believing poor, the refinement of goals and of concrete means, celebration in joy and hope despite discrimination, persecution and problems, and rediscovery of the signs of life, of joy, of beatitude.

It has gradually become clear, and integrated into the life and activity of the CEBs, that the goal is the Kingdom, the Reign of God.

In this vision of the ministry of the CEBs of Latin America and the Caribbean we prize and cannot abandon:

- the centrality of Jesus Christ and his project of the Kingdom;
- the discernment of reality in the light of faith and of the Word of God;
- our critical and prophetic voice within society and within the Church itself;
- a steadfast attitude of resistance and persistence;
- the consciousness of the CEBs' distinctive identity as a way of being Church with its own autonomy;
- the fundamental importance of the CEBs' communal dimension;
- the meetings of the communities and work in networks coordinated at the continental level;
- the option for the poor, against poverty and for a life of dignity;
- the remaking of life and the recreation of the sense of living well;
- the fundamental commitments of liberation theology;

- an ecclesiology in accordance with Vatican II and its conception of the Church of the People of God;
- the involvement of the CEBs in popular movements such as those of indigenous peoples, Afro-Americans and the landless, in social struggles and in political parties tied to popular struggle, and in green campaigning;
- work with teenagers and young adults;
- ecumenism;
- commitment to the defence of the environment;
- the programmes of initial and ongoing training of CEB leaders and advisers organized by diocesan and national coordinating committees;
- systematic reading and conjunctural analysis by biblical scholars, theologians and specialists in different fields, which offers ongoing sustenance to our project.

The CEBs cannot compromise on their commitment to the poor, to justice, which would only lead to uncertainty. That is how our lay people, our martyrs, our forebears lived.

## Challenges

The CEBs find themselves constantly challenged by:

- the need for resistance in the face of the great challenges of reality and also those from the Church, which finds it difficult to accept the CEBs as its own first level and its own small-scale expression;
- the ongoing planning and evaluation of the CEB's effects on the life of society;
- young people and their need for spaces of participation and action;
- the need for greater critical autonomy, within the Church and in relation to political movements that may rob us of our identity;
- the reaffirmation and further promotion of lay ministry in the widest sense, rather than any narrow institutionalisation;
- the preservation of the memory of our martyrs and theologians who have given their lives in this process;
- opening ourselves to inter-religious dialogue;
- the exploitation of technology in order to enrich our experience;

- the search for ways of developing citizenship within the CEBs, given that favouritism, *caudillismo*, bribery and corruption are prevalent in the surrounding cultures;
- inter-organisation, establishing new realities and new horizons;
- the permanent, ongoing repair of the social fabric.

I conclude with some words of encouragement from the National Conference of Brazilian Bishops, meeting on 12 May 2010:

“The ‘ecclesiastical base communities,’ we said in 1982, represent ‘in our country a reality that expresses one of the most dynamic features in the life of the Church’ (“Comunidades Eclesiales de Base en la Iglesia del Brasil,” CNBB, Doc. 25,1). Following the Aparecida Conference (2007) and the 12th Inter-Church Meeting [of CEBs] (Porto Velho 2009), we wish to offer our sisters and brothers of the CEBs a brief message of encouragement on their journey.

We wish to reaffirm that they continue to be ‘a sign of vitality within the Church’ (RM 51). In them, Christ’s disciples come together in attentive listening to the Word of God, in the quest for more fraternal relations, in celebration of the Christian mysteries in their own lives and to live their commitment to the transformation of society. Furthermore, as was affirmed by Medellín, the base community is ‘the first and fundamental ecclesiastical nucleus [...] the initial cell of the ecclesiastical structures and the focus of evangelization, and it currently serves as the most important source of human advancement and development’ (Medellín 15).

Therefore, ‘As pastors, attentive to the life of the Church in our society, we would look on them with affection, listen to them, and attempt to discover, through their life, so intimately connected to the history of the people amongst whom they exist, the road that opens up before them for the future’ (CNBB 25,5). [...]

‘To conclude these reflections, we wish to thank God for the gift that the CEBs represent for the life of the Church in Brazil, for the union that exists between our brothers and sisters and their pastors, and for the hope that this new way of being Church will increasingly act as a ferment of renewal in our society. (CNBB 25, 94).’<sup>494</sup>

<sup>494</sup> CNBB, “Mensaje al pueblo de Dios sobre las Comunidades Eclesiales de Base,” 48th General Meeting of the National Conference of Brazilian Bishops, at: <http://www.adital.com.br/site/noticia.asp?lang=ES&cod=47951>.



# Theological-Pastoral Foundations of DIIPA-Vision for Small Christian Communities

Thomas Vijay

The origin of 'DIIPA' (Developing Indian Integral Pastoral Approach) Vision goes back to the Lumko Small Christian Communities training programmes from South Africa which was widely used in India in the 1990s. The FABC (Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences) in Bandung, Indonesia in 1990, making the SCCs a pastoral priority for the whole of Asia, stated that the Church in Asia will have to be a Communion of many small communities, in which the clergy, laity and religious accept each other as brothers and sisters.

Bishop Oswald Hirmer, one of the visionaries of the Lumko Small Christian Communities programme of South Africa, who animated the workshop on SCCs for the above-mentioned FABC General Assembly in 1990, prepared Training Programmes to promote this vision of the Church given by the Asian Bishops, in the Asian countries. He called these training programmes 'AsIPA' (Asian Integral Pastoral Approach).

This programme was introduced in India in January 1995 in Palai by Oswald Hirmer and Fr. Thomas Vijay and since then several AsIPA workshops were held in different parts of the country. An interested group of SCC animators from several dioceses of India met in Sept-2001 at Pallottine Animation Centre, Nagpur and gave this programme an Indian name 'DIIPA', adapting the programme to the Indian situations and needs. DIIPA programmes received wide acceptance since then and some of these texts are translated into 12 Indian languages - Hindi, Oriya, Malayalam, Marathi, Angami, Tamil, Sadiri, Konkani, Bodo, Khasi, Santhali and Bengali.

DIIPA in many Indian languages means light. We hope that this programme becomes a light for the people of our country in renewing

the Church. Each word in **DIIPA** has special Theological Pastoral - Spiritual connotation as stated below.

We speak of 'Developing' because we want to remind ourselves and the pastoral workers in India that no pastoral programme is final. The Spirit is always present and active in the community, renewing, challenging and transforming it continuously and helping it to respond in the Kingdom way to the changing situations and needs of the people in different places and times.

***Indian:***

We place the vision given by the Asian Bishops in the Indian situation. We want to empower the people of India to respond to this vision together as a people from within their life context. In this way they make this vision their own and take the responsibility to realize it in their life.

***Integral:***

We seek the integral growth of the whole person and of the whole community, integrating body and soul, secular and sacred, theory and practice, faith and life and building the clergy and laity into one body.

***Pastoral:***

Our concern is to enable our people to re-dream the dream of Jesus in their life context and respond to it together in their neighbourhood. In this way they become instruments for God to reveal the Indian face of Jesus among the people of India.

***Approach:***

DIIPA is an approach, one way to serve the Kingdom plan of God, but a very effective and biblical way. This approach has certain characteristics.

**It is Christ - centred**

We emphasize on Gospel Sharing as the way and means through which the community is led to experience the Risen Lord in their lives and to discern God's will for them in their life situations and respond

to it decisively and positively. All our lessons are rooted in the Word of God as a source of life and light for their lives.

### **It is community - centred**

We want to move away from the 'expert centred' approach to pastoral programmes to a 'community- centered' approach. Here, the expert sits with the people, listens to them and lets them participate with him in making the kind of programmes they want to have. In this way we affirm that 'the Church is the People of God' and that they are subjects of the Kingdom and are capable of contributing to the community building process. The so called expert is a servant/ animator of the community and must work with the community.

### **It is mission-oriented.**

It helps the whole community to become aware that through Baptism and Confirmation they have accepted the responsibility to continue the mission of Jesus in their respective places in a concrete way. There is no non-servant disciple of Jesus; all have the duty to participate actively in the building up of the Body of Christ and witness to the Gospel in their place and time.

### **Non-dominating Leadership**

In the future Church, as the Asian Bishops said, the experts and leaders are not dominating leaders. They are not the focal point; Jesus and the community are. It is the community which will work together and evangelize the neighbourhood to make the Kingdom of God present there. The leaders and pastoral experts are servants and animators of the community.

## **Theological Foundations of DIIPA Vision**

### ***A New Sense of Church: the Church in the Neighbourhood***

"The Church in Asia will have to be a communion of communities where laity, clergy and religious recognize and accept each other as sisters and brothers. They are called together by the Word of God which, regarded as a quasi-sacramental presence of the Risen Lord, leads them to form Small Christian Communities (e.g. neighbourhood

groups, Basic Ecclesial Communities and covenant communities). There they pray and share together the Gospel of Jesus, living it in their daily lives as they support one another and work together, united as they are “in one mind and heart”<sup>495</sup>.

When Vatican II stated that the Church is the People of God<sup>496</sup> no one understood fully what it would imply in concrete terms. The community of the faithful became the focus. SCCs helped us to experience ‘the People of God’ sense of Church in a new and concrete way. The focus of Church got a new emphasis from the parish to the neighbourhood. Until recently parish was the smallest unit of the Church and the centre of Church activities. Now the neighbourhood also becomes an important centre of Church life and activity. A group of the faithful living in a certain neighbourhood never understood themselves as Church before; now the Church considers an ‘SCC a Concrete Expression of Ecclesial Communion’<sup>497</sup>. Pope Paul VI stated that the emergence of SCCs is a result of the failure of the existing Church structure to live truly ecclesial life and that SCCs will unite people in the Church and cause the Church to grow.<sup>498</sup> The East African Bishops conference said that they support SCCs emphatically because “it is time for the Church to become “local”, that is: self-ministering, self-propagating and self-supporting”.<sup>499</sup> We can see SCCs as an instrument of the Spirit, gathering into unity the various peoples of this universe, making the Church a sign of communion of all humanity in Jesus Christ.<sup>500</sup> Whatever mission the Universal Church stands for is to be fulfilled in the particular neighbourhood by the Christian community there. If the faithful living in that neighbourhood do not come together, neither will they have a sense of Church nor will they understand their mission in that place, even though they may have been living there for years and go to Church on every Sunday. People meet in the Church only once a week while they live in the same neighbourhood seven days a week and interact

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<sup>495</sup> FABC Bandung Statement 1990, 8.1.1.

<sup>496</sup> LG 1.

<sup>497</sup> RM 51, CL 26.

<sup>498</sup> EN 58.

<sup>499</sup> AMACEA, Planning for the Church in East Africa in the 1980s, 9-10.

<sup>500</sup> EA 17.

with people of different creeds and cultures there in a stable way. It is there that they need to be Church, a Sacrament of God's love<sup>501</sup>, in a concrete way and become responsible for their Christian mission. Only they can fulfill that mission there on behalf of the Universal Church. When they fail in that, the Universal Church fails there. In the midst of so many cultures and religions, the life of the Church as a communion is of paramount importance.<sup>502</sup> The Sunday Liturgy will hopefully enable them to grow stronger in faith and witness to Jesus in the neighbourhood.

Karl Rahner says that forming basic communities is a reality based on a spontaneous response of a group of Christians. He argues that we will no longer be able to maintain communities of faith through official insistence from above. People are liberated today to follow their own values and life style. Faith can be nurtured only by free choices of believers and must allow such basic communities to emerge<sup>503</sup>.

When such communities attain certain structure, solidity and permanence and not merely an association and when they are able to responsibly sustain the basic essential functions of the Church like, organized proclamation of the Gospel, celebration of the Sacraments, Christian charity ad so on, it can very well be considered a 'Local Church' in some sense<sup>504</sup>. The Local Church is not a branch of the Universal Church, but a legitimate local congregation of the faithful, united under their pastor making the Church of Christ truly present.<sup>505</sup> Building up a truly local Church is the primary focus of evangelization. The local Church is the enfleshment or embodiment of the Body of Christ in a given people, time and place.<sup>506</sup> This is most visible and experienced in the life of a group of believers living in a certain neighbourhood. Even when they do not interact with one another they are already affecting the shape of the Church there very concretely and in this case certainly in an unchristian way. The SCCs is a fundamental

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<sup>501</sup> LG 1, EA 13.

<sup>502</sup> EA 24.

<sup>503</sup> *The Shape of the Church to Come*, Karl Rahner, The Crossroad Publishing company, New York, 108.

<sup>504</sup> *Ibid.* 109.

<sup>505</sup> LG 26.

<sup>506</sup> Florez, G., *An Appeal to the Church, the Mission of the Church in Asia*, 110.

way of Christian gathering and is treated as a 'Concrete Expression of the Church'. A group of believers in a particular neighbourhood give shape to the Church when they allow their faith to interact lovingly and continuously with the living traditions of people there.<sup>507</sup> The mystery of Church is a dynamic event which happens to a group of believers in a place, leading them to an encounter with the Risen Lord. That experience generates an urge in the believer to share it with the rest of the community and celebrate it joyfully in the Eucharist. This God-experience gives them the motivation and power to transform the contemporary situation through their humble and loving services and interactions with the society.<sup>508</sup>

The Universal Church is concretely present, alive and active in the neighbourhood. Pope John Paul II said that SCCs are "a true expression of communion and a means for the construction of a more profound communion"<sup>509</sup>, obviously in the neighbourhood. SCCs have a great potential to build up authentic local churches with a sense of mission.<sup>510</sup> Hence it is important that we pay utmost attention to and foster carefully the Church in the neighbourhood. One of the most common things that SCCs members say everywhere is that unlike their life before SCCs were started, they feel united with the rest of the neighbours and the sense of belonging has grown. This is exactly what a Church of communion means. It confirms that SCCs is a sure way to build up a more profound communion among the members of the community, as Pope John Paul II said.

The neighbourhood is a real arena of life filled with activities, tensions and interactions. It is where life is made or broken, where people make, break or restore relationships and where we face poverty and affluence, injustice and human rights issues. It is where people compete with one another for sheer profit or help one another to face up to life, where people experience the fury of modern warfare and where people struggle to make peace with one another. The Word must be planted here like a leaven, like a mustard seed and nurtured.

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<sup>507</sup> Ibid. 111.

<sup>508</sup> Ibid.

<sup>509</sup> RM 51.

<sup>510</sup> Message to the Church in India from the National Assembly Yesu Khrist Jayanti 2000 Bangalore, no.44.

The Small Christian Communities, enthused and empowered by the Word to respond to these challenges, become source of new life in Jesus and a prophetic sign of the Kingdom in the neighbourhood<sup>511</sup>. The neighbourhood stands between the individual and the larger society as an agent of transformation. Ordinarily an individual alone finds it difficult to act against social evils. A community empowered by the Word of God can effect conversion in the individuals and support them in acting in a prophetic way for the transformation of the society.

The new way the Church sees a diocese is as “a communion of communities”<sup>512</sup> The emphasis of parish as the centre of the Church activities is now re-focused to the neighbourhood. The parish still has a role as the animator, unifier, energizer, coordinator of the SCCs; but it is in the neighbourhood that people experience a new and powerful sense of ‘Being Church’ in a concrete way. As they gather together for prayer and discussions on various issues and needs of the community they feel called to undertake different services in the neighbourhood, inspired by their faith and witnessing to the Lord in a prophetic way.<sup>513</sup> “The church is constantly in the process of becoming, at the local level of the parish or the base community. This is where ministers will nourish or hinder that process of becoming. The incarnation of the Church cannot remain an abstraction but must become visible as sacrament in concrete form in the actual life of the believing community.”<sup>514</sup>

Some of the examples in the parish of Badmal in Sambalpur diocese, will verify what we mean by this new sense of the Church in the neighbourhood. Before SCCs were started in this parish, people had no real sense of community and service. SCCs helped them to see themselves as a Church and live that sense of Church in concrete ways as inspired by the Gospel. They:

- Helped a drunkard to stop drinking and to become responsible member of the family.
- Started to dig a pond for the village, which inspired the ‘panchayat’ to help them to complete it.

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<sup>511</sup> Bandung Statement, no.8.

<sup>512</sup> EA 25.

<sup>513</sup> Bandung Statement, 8.1.1.

<sup>514</sup> Rademacher, W., Lay Ministry, The Crossroad Publishing Company New York, 95.

- Took initiatives to do the maintenance work of a panchayat road.
- Built a shed for cooking for the patients who come to the local hospital.
- Initiated a cleanliness drive in the village.
- Levelled a hill and built a grotto near the parish church.
- Built a ‘balwadi’ school building for the village children.
- Fenced the whole parish compound
- Took initiative to start five other SCCs and successfully guided and supported these newly started groups.

One can see the new sense of community and mission these people gained through SCCs and this sense of Church in the neighbourhood is the hope of the Church of tomorrow. Karl Rahner says that such communities and their leaders have a right to be recognized by the institutional Church. Their leaders must be allowed to serve the community and to build up the community.<sup>515</sup>

#### **‘Sensus Fidelium’ – the Sense of Faith of the Faithful.**

James and Evelyn Whitehead speak of the profound sense of faith a community needs to have in order to organize its faith living and activities:

“The maturity of a community of faith will be related to its developing sense of instinct about Christian values and how these are to be practically lived. Each community might be expected to come to a practical and reliable sense of how to exercise its faith – how we as Christians here and now are to celebrate the Lord’s presence, to act for justice, to commit ourselves in love and work. This practical sense of belief is fragile and always in need of development: as such it is a focus of the ministry in the community. And it is a sense of faith that is rooted in the whole body of believers. It is not a sense of teachings and beliefs brought to the community by professional ministers, but a sense or instinct about lived faith that is developing within this body of believers, ... most of whom are not clergy, but laity”<sup>516</sup>.

<sup>515</sup> Rahner 109.

<sup>516</sup> Whitehead E.E. / Whitehead, J.D., *Community of Faith*, New York, 164.

A very common complaint we hear everywhere about the lay faithful is that their 'sense of faith' is poor/weak. They would give up their faith for very silly reasons or they expect the Church to serve them and they are not willing to serve the Church and so on. What is alarming is that these communities have been existing for many years and some of them for centuries. This weak sense of Church and mission could be the result of the belief, even if implicitly, that the proper sense of faith is always found in the hierarchy only and people are ignorant. The Church documents affirm that the people do have a sense of faith which can guide the Church. The Dogmatic Constitution on Church speaks of 'a supernatural sense of faith the community is capable of, to which it clings, which penetrates it more deeply by accurate insights and applies it more thoroughly to its life.'<sup>517</sup> Christ made laity his witnesses to whom "he gave understanding of faith (*sensus fidei*) and attractiveness in speech so that the power of the Gospel might shine forth in their daily social and family life".<sup>518</sup> The synod of bishops in 1980 spoke of the sense of faith the families, rooted in the Church traditions, live. It admitted that the faith of the Church is the fruit of the living faith of all the people – once again affirming the 'sense of faith of the faithful' as important element of Christian faith.<sup>519</sup> In fact the Church has survived all these centuries with the sense of faith the faithful lived and shared in communities around the world. I think that the hierarchy needs to pay greater attention to this fact and that passing on of faith is a community task and the hierarchy has a definite role to help the community to fulfill that responsibility in communion with the whole Church. If we over-emphasize the role of hierarchy and underplay the role of the community, it will affect the Church as a whole and her ability to live and pass on faith. What is needed and important for the future Church is to acknowledge and strengthen this sense of faith the believing community has. The task of the minister of the community is precisely to **train, guide and affirm** the sense of faith the people live and share. "Then they shall be children no longer, tossed one way and another and carried along by every wind of doctrine, at the mercy of all tricks men play and their cleverness

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<sup>517</sup> LG 12.

<sup>518</sup> Ibid. 35.

<sup>519</sup> Whitehead 165.

in practicing deceit” (Eph.4:14). They will gradually come to possess a ‘seasoned sense of faith.’ It can be that they fail at times; but still will possess that seasoned sense of faith in their community living and have the intuitive sense to discern its veracity. Thus, the community matures in the stewardship of the Lord – to hold faith as a value in its living and pass it on to the next generation faithfully.<sup>520</sup> “Mature communities of faith guard against false feelings and unchristian instincts. It is the maturity of their seasoned sense of Christian faith that allows this community of the faithful to “at once feel” that a certain decision or development is inappropriate. To stay with Cardinal Newman’s image of a bodily instinct, the sense of the faithful allows this part of the Body of Christ to sense foreign matter, to recognize the effects of harmful elements that may have gotten into the system. Such a seasoned instinct would recognize and reject both humanistic fads and fundamentalistic biases that attempt to pass as Christian instinct.”<sup>521</sup> It is such a sense of the faith of the believing community which gives the community its own identity and concretized sense of vocation and mission and how they are to conduct themselves and to challenge the society and the world.<sup>522</sup>

This collective sense of faith needs regular formation and guidance. This sense of faith lived in their lives and celebrated in their liturgies, is the subject of constant formation and practical decisions. It is not a mere passive assent to doctrines.<sup>523</sup> What we find is that the SCCs are sure ways to lead people to such a strong and mature sense of faith as we see in many examples. One such example is given below.

In the archdiocese of Nagpur, the small parish of Jaitala with 40 families, started 6 SCC units. In one of the SCC units during the discussions at the 6<sup>th</sup> step of the Gospel Sharing, they were discussing the task they are to undertake. Someone in the group spoke about the child of a Catholic widow who could not be sent to school because of her poverty. They decided to make a collection to help her to send the child to school. As this was in progress, a Hindu poor widow in

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<sup>520</sup> Ibid. 162.

<sup>521</sup> Ibid. 164.

<sup>522</sup> Ibid. 166.

<sup>523</sup> Ibid. 166.

the same neighbourhood complained to the Catholic widow that her son is admitted in the hospital and she needs help urgently to pay the medical bills. This issue was brought into the next SCC meeting. The meeting said unanimously that the help will be given to the Catholic lady since she is a member of the community and she will get preference over the Hindu. But the Catholic lady spoke up: "You see, my son will not die if he does not go to school; but if we don't help that Hindu widow, she might lose her son. I feel for her and I do not mind that you give that money collected to her to pay the medical bills of her son." At this, the whole body was moved and they decided to give the money to the Hindu widow. This is indeed a seasoned sense of faith that community has developed through SCCs and this is the sense of faith every community needs to possess and live in their neighbourhoods if the Church is to be a living faith community.

Each SCC, parish, diocese must work on its own 'lived sense of faith', purify it, build it and bring it to fruition and service. Such a sense of faith of the community and its vocation in the local context can withstand trials and conflicts and grow through it purifying and strengthening itself constantly.<sup>524</sup> But when a group of believers living the neighbourhoods do not share such a seasoned sense of faith it is impossible for a parish to possess such a mature sense of faith.

This sense of faith gives a community power to act prophetically even if its leaders or others oppose it. Obviously such a state of living faith needs good formation, guidance and support<sup>525</sup>. Many leaders in the Church seem to be fearful of such a situation where people become assertive and decisive in living their faith. This is often a sign of lack of a lived sense of faith in such leaders and or the leader seeing his/her faith separate from that of the community and his/her life being isolated from the life of the people.

### **The Brother/Sisterhood of all in the One God who is Father of all**

The Church in Asia will have to be a communion of communities where laity, clergy and religious recognize and accept each other as sisters and brothers.<sup>526</sup>

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<sup>524</sup> Ibid. 168.

<sup>525</sup> Ibid. 167.

<sup>526</sup> Bandung Statement, no.8.1.1.

Jesus has spoken very clearly that our God is a Father full of compassion for all human beings and plans to save all in and through Jesus (Jn.3:16-17). This truth must be experienced by people in the world through the Christian community which is the Sacrament of God's love.<sup>527</sup> The invitation of Gospel to the brother/sisterhood of all the people is the proof and sign of this Fatherhood of God.<sup>528</sup> Through Gospel Sharing the SCCs help the Christian community to become sisters and brothers in the Lord;<sup>529</sup> their relationship is not based Church roles. The SCCs help the clergy, religious and laity to involve in a dialogue of life,<sup>530</sup> fostering mutual respect and fellowship. This is the way Jesus treated his disciples (Lk.8:21, Jn.15:14) and exhorted his disciples to relate to one other (Mt.23:8-10). This is the spirit of brotherhood which motivated the first Christians to share everything together (Act.2:44-45). St. Paul instructs his successor Timothy, a bishop, that he should exhort elderly men as though they are his fathers, older women as mothers and to treat younger men/women as brothers/sisters ..(1 Tim.5:1-2). The clergy are brothers to the whole community, members of the one Body of Christ.<sup>531</sup> The language or cultural differences which divide people must be transformed into constructive and mutually enriching forces, gathering all nations and peoples into one in Jesus (Col.3:11). The different service roles believers take up are for building up the Body of Christ (Eph.4:11-12); it does not and should not change the fraternal/sisterly way of accepting and relating to one another. This fraternal/sisterly relationship is the foundation of a Christian community and the sign of the active presence of the Spirit among them. It is not enough to talk about the Father/Motherhood of God. The example of Jesus challenges us to live it and witness to it in our attitudes to one another. To be Church means to live the intimate love and sharing which characterizes the Trinity and this can be experienced more in a tangible way in small communities,<sup>532</sup> than in large anonymous communities. Vatican II

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<sup>527</sup> LG 1.

<sup>528</sup> Florez 101.

<sup>529</sup> Bandung Statement, no.8.1.1.

<sup>530</sup> EA 25.

<sup>531</sup> PO 9.

<sup>532</sup> O'Halloran, J., *Small Christian Communities, Vision and Practicalities*, Dublin 2012, 17.

confirms that there is a common dignity of all the members of the Church and that all vocations are equal in importance in building the Body of Christ<sup>533</sup>. The frequent gatherings of a parish community must be to confirm this common dignity of all the believers and to strengthen the brotherhood of all people and to work together for a more just world. This is just not possible through a mere ritualistic performance of the Sunday Liturgy. The SCC is the platform to build such a brother/sisterhood and it is capable of overcoming divisions and brokenness within itself based on human tendencies and root itself on the love of the Gospel.<sup>534</sup> Pope John Paul II states that pastors ought to foster small ecclesial communities which are “living” communities of faith where the faithful can listen to the Word and respond to it in loving service of one another. This is an effective way to foster authentic communion among the faithful in parishes.<sup>535</sup>

Such quest for solidarity and human fellowship is visible in different life situations of today – in organized efforts for justice, peace, harmony and in various levels of dialogue.<sup>536</sup> Increasingly the world moves towards democratic politics giving people dignity, respect and equal opportunity for growth and service. The many human organizations across the world promoting justice, harmony, solidarity, environment, etc give ample evidence to this human quest and they transcend all cultural, religious, political or other divisive tendencies in society and the Church too join hands with them in creating a more just human order based on Gospel.<sup>537</sup> The SCCs are only adding strength to this human process rooted in the God-experience of the people of these times and affirming the validity and relevance of the Gospel even in these times for all the people. Thousands of SCCs testify to this fact. One of the most obvious and common fruits of SCCs is people of different walks of life, growing in the spirit of brother/sisterhood in the Lord, in spite of cultural and status differences, as the Mallipara parish community testifies.

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<sup>533</sup> LG 32; Canon 208.

<sup>534</sup> RM 51.

<sup>535</sup> CL 26.

<sup>536</sup> IL 25, FABC Bandung, Statement, no.2.

<sup>537</sup> EA 24.

A parish priest reports: “While I was in Malippara, a parish in the diocese of Kothamangalam, Kerala, I was with one SCC group doing the Gospel Sharing. One man in the group shared that though not very rich, God had given him enough wealth; but he felt that he was not sharing that with his neighbours who are poor. In that meeting itself at the 6<sup>th</sup> step he suggested that the SCC build a house for the abandoned poor couples. After some discussion, everyone accepted his suggestion and planned to build a house. Within one year, with the help of neighbouring SCCs, they built three houses and gave two to poor Christian couples and the 3<sup>rd</sup> one to a Hindu couple. And the 13 SCC units in turn took the responsibility to take care of them. Even in this 3<sup>rd</sup> year everything is going on well there. Even the non-Christians in the neighbourhood participated in building the houses and in taking care of the inmates.

### Word-centred Communities

They are called together by the Word of the God which, regarded as a quasi-sacramental presence of the Risen Lord, leads them to form Small Christian Communities (e.g. neighbourhood groups, Basic Ecclesial Communities and covenant communities). There they pray and share together the Gospel of Jesus, living it in their daily lives as they support one another and work together, united as they are “in one mind and heart”<sup>538</sup>.

So often we hear people say that they read the Bible or they discuss it in their community, etc. In the New Way of Being Church, as the Asian bishops tell us, it is not a question of a group of Christians reading the Word, but it is **the Word which calls them together**.<sup>539</sup> The initiative comes from above. “You did not choose me; I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit, the kind of fruit that endures” (Jn.16:16). Gospel is essentially and invitation from Jesus Christ to embrace the Father/Motherhood of God, making us all brothers and sisters.<sup>540</sup> This means the believers accept this call lovingly and respond to the Word faithfully. It calls for an attitude of reverence, surrender, obedience and faithfulness from all believers, be they clergy, laity or religious. The

<sup>538</sup> FABC Bandung Statement, no. 8.1.1.

<sup>539</sup> Ibid. 8.1.1.

<sup>540</sup> Florez 101.

Church as a community always venerated the Sacred Scriptures as she venerated the Eucharist.<sup>541</sup> This veneration, which is communal, is not a pious feeling, but a collective commitment to live by the Word. The priest or Sister is not outside this circle, but inside and part of the community and whatever transformation is effected by the Word, affects the priest/sister or leader. The transformation called by the Word is all-inclusive and not merely for one section of the community. There is a problem in the way conversion or growth is understood in communities. Often the priest or leader tries to change others or sees his/her conversion/growth outside or apart from the community. The seminary staff tries to prepare the seminarians without including them in the growth process. This is an unchristian approach. Scriptures tell us that Jesus, even though he was God, did not count his equality with God as something he must cling on to, but emptied himself and became human and obedient unto death (Phil.2:5-8). The Kingdom vision affected the Son of God and it transformed him according to his Father's will. This is the way all conversions happen; it affects and transforms all. The Word read, affects all and invites all to respond both collectively and individually in the given situation. If one section of the community refuses to be part of this transformative process, it has a stifling effect on the growth of the others. Often conversion is understood purely in a personal sense; each individual is expected to respond to the call of God and read the Word personally making it a private exercise. A lot of sermons given in the Church emphasize personal fidelity of the believers to the Word, but not so much communal fidelity. But Bible asks for collective (communal) fidelity (Ex. 19:4-6), which means also collective accountability. God wills to make us holy and save us not as isolated individuals, but by making us into a single people.<sup>542</sup> The SCCs do Gospel Sharing precisely for this reason. They reflect together and share the experience of the Word in their lives and try to respond to it collectively. This is the way the community will build itself on strong foundations (Mt.7:24-25, acts.20:32). This is the way the servant of God equips and prepares him/herself for the service of the Kingdom (2 Tim.3:17).As Vatican II teaches, the nourishment of the Word enlightens the minds,

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<sup>541</sup> DV 21.

<sup>542</sup> LG 9.

strengthens the will and fires the hearts of human beings with the love of God.<sup>543</sup> Rootedness in and collective fidelity to the Word are two fundamental aspects of Christian holiness.

In Brazil members of SCCs said that before SCCs were started Bible was always on the side of those who taught, gave orders and handed out the pay; but with the SCCs, Bible came to the side of those who are being taught, ordered and paid.<sup>544</sup> This indicates the fact that mere reading of the Word as an intellectual exercise is not enough; the Word must be placed in the life situations of the community and the community must listen to the Spirit and be willing to act in accordance with the direction of the Spirit. The Farmers who sat in BCC meetings spoke of the Bible of life which is their own lives, full of efforts to live the Gospel.<sup>545</sup> The centrality of the Word is not only in SCCs, but it is the nature of all Christian community gatherings. Preaching the Kingdom message means the People living the teachings of Jesus.<sup>546</sup> SCCs make this truth come true.

The SCCs help in fostering an authentic sense of discipleship, a genuine spirit of communion and of loving service among the faithful through listening and responding to the Word.<sup>547</sup> Seeing the Word of God merely in the Bible is not helpful. It is always placed and understood in a given context.<sup>548</sup> This necessitates that all the faithful must meet around the Word and surrender themselves to this call of the Word. SCCs can help the community to be transformed in this way to become 'a-Jesus-community-in-mission' in their neighbourhood. When that happens many things change and transform in the community the Kingdom way, the way the Spirit of God wants things in the community and beyond it.

Many SCCs testify to this inner transformation that the Word brings to their lives. In the diocese of Dumka, SCCs were started in a parish and they were introduced to Gospel Sharing. In the beginning

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<sup>543</sup> DV 23.

<sup>544</sup> Mesters, C., *Defenseless Flower, A New Reading of the Bible*, New York, 7.

<sup>545</sup> *Ibid* 9.

<sup>546</sup> Lombardi, R., *Church and Kingdom of God*, Manila, 110.

<sup>547</sup> CL 26.

<sup>548</sup> O'Halloran 43.

no one had the courage to share their personal experiences with the others. One day as they gathered in the evening for the Gospel Sharing at the 5<sup>th</sup> step one person took courage and shared something about his family. This touched the others and another picked up courage to share, then another and another... the sharing went on. All the participants wanted to share. The SCC meeting which started at 7.00 in the evening ended at 7.00 in the morning the next day. No one said that I am tired or I wanted to go home. From that day, that community was not more the same. They were transformed into a community of love. So much of love and concern for one another was visible in their lives since then. They were Catholics for years before, but always understood it as a matter of few duties and obligations, not a call to love and to serve. The Gospel Sharing in the SCCs led to such a great transformation in their lives. Indeed 'the Word of God is alive and active and a double-edged sword which can cut through all the way to where the soul and spirit meet' (Heb.4:12).

### **A Participative Church in the Kingdom Way**

The Asian Church is a participatory Church in which the gifts and charisms that the Holy Spirit gives to all the faithful - lay, religious and cleric alike - are recognized and activated so that the Church may be built up and its mission realized<sup>549</sup>.

The sense of participation has to be understood in the Kingdom vision of God. In the Kingdom vision all are equals and partners, sisters and brothers. There are no Jews or Greeks, not slaves or free men, no great and small; all are one in Jesus (Col.3:11). The early community worked together as partners for the mission of the Church. In his letter to the Romans chapter 16 we hear St. Paul referring to many lay people as his co-workers/partners. The Church (community) by its nature is missionary<sup>550</sup> and the Church exists in order to evangelize<sup>551</sup>. Pope John Paul II states that the lay people are "co-responsible" with the clergy for the mission of the Church<sup>552</sup>. Pope Paul VI said that

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<sup>549</sup> Bandung Statement, no.8.1.2.

<sup>550</sup> AG 2.

<sup>551</sup> EN 14.

<sup>552</sup> CL Chapter III.

it is unthinkable that a person accept the Word of God and not witness to it and proclaim it in his/her turn<sup>553</sup>. If the lay people are co-responsible for the mission of the Church they must be trained for it with similar emphasis given for the training of the clergy/religious. The clergy must respect the freedom of all in the community, listen to the laity, support and foster their initiatives and charisms.<sup>554</sup> Indeed, the task of 'Being Church' in a particular locality is the mission of the Christians living there. They need to understand what it means "To Be Church" in their neighbourhood. They need to be empowered to stand up to the challenges of the Gospel there and be motivated to offer their gifts, resources and charisms generously for service of God's people there. Their leaders need to be trained well to animate and support the community as they try to discern together the will of God for them here and now. Without such a commitment to the Gospel in the neighbourhood their faith and their Sunday liturgies have no meaning.

Mission at any level of the Church cannot be seen apart from communion; they are inseparably connected. "They interpenetrate and mutually imply each other so that communion represents both the source and fruit of mission. Communion gives rise to mission and mission is accomplished in communion."<sup>555</sup> If this profound connection between communion and mission is to be understood and lived fully the Church must find a structure and method to acknowledge, develop and use the charisms and gifts of all the members of the community for her own growth and service. SCCs is an effective means to promote such a communion and participation and a genuine force of evangelization.<sup>556</sup>

As the Asian Bishops said, this new vision leads to a pastoral imperative of re-visioning and re-planning formation process, with particular attention being given to cultural values and structural factors.<sup>557</sup> If this sense of co-responsibility is to be lived, the parish

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<sup>553</sup> Ibid. 24.

<sup>554</sup> PO 9.

<sup>555</sup> EA 24.

<sup>556</sup> Ibid. 25.

<sup>557</sup> Bandung Statement 7.1, A.6.

structure and leadership must be re-visualized. Clergy and laity must be formed for such a meaningful and mutually respectful collaboration.

God's enduring presence cannot be the privilege of one section of the Church. It is God's gift to the whole Church.<sup>558</sup> Ministry is even now 'uni-directional', hierarchical, often causing passivity in the faith of the people. The radical mutuality and oneness demanded by Gospel mandates that we recognize the multi-dimensional quality of Christian ministry.<sup>559</sup> Although Vatican II acknowledges that all vocations are equal in importance in building up the Body of Christ<sup>560</sup> in actual practice this does not seem to be so. A charismatically rich ecclesiology makes it very difficult to precisely demarcate the distinct frontiers of various apostolic calls and their responses,<sup>561</sup> and makes all part of the Body of Christ and co-responsible in the missionary mandate of the Church. That part of the mission which each community must accomplish in living out their faith in their neighbourhood cannot be fulfilled by any expert or missionary from some foreign land. It is the baptismal responsibility of those Christians who live there. The role of missionaries and Church leaders is to empower them. Some years back, when Fr. Aruldas was murdered in Baleshwar diocese in Orissa, he was celebrating the harvest feast with the community of 16 new convert families in a village, 14 kms. interior, accessible only by foot. His murder led to a law and order problem. The district collector requested the bishop not to send any priest or sister to that place until they give further orders since he was not in a position to provide protection to them. No priest or Sister went to that place for more than 8 months. After 8 months one priest took courage to visit that village. What he saw there surprised him and deepened his faith. The 16 families, though very poor and new in faith, re-constructed the chapel burnt down by the enemies of the Church and prayed there every day asking the Lord to protect them since they had no one else. They grew in faith as a community and were ready to carry on the mission of the Church there even though no priest or Sister was there.

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<sup>558</sup> Whitehead 168.

<sup>559</sup> Ibid. 167.

<sup>560</sup> LG 32.

<sup>561</sup> "In the Union to Evangelize", the final document of the 17<sup>th</sup> General Assembly of the Pallottine Fathers, Rome, 1992, no.12. b).

Though there is a lot of talk going on in the Church about co-responsibility of all the faithful, we have not always gauged effectively its full import nor have we made enough efforts to re-visualize and re-structure the diocese and parishes to empower all to act in a co-responsible and interdependent way. Pope John Paul II says that SCCs decentralize and organize the parish so as to make them a leaven of Christian life and of commitment to the transformation of the society.<sup>562</sup> The Latin Bishops' Conference of India affirmed that SCCs ensure a participatory, active, vibrant and evangelizing church.<sup>563</sup> That precisely is what should be visualized in and through SCCs in all dioceses. SCCs have proven to be very good and effective instruments of fostering this spirit of co-responsibility in parish communities.

### **Becoming Prophetic Communities**

'It (the Asian Church) is a leaven of transformation in this world and serves as a prophetic sign daring to point this world to the ineffable Kingdom that is yet fully to come'<sup>564</sup>.

Gospel builds and empowers communities and individuals in prophetic roles demanded by Gospel in the given situation. It is impossible to be faithful to Jesus and not be prophetic. In the Kingdom vision of God the most important fruit of love is justice. The joys, pains and agonies of men and women of our times are the joys, pains and agonies of the followers of Christ<sup>565</sup>. What God wants is not burnt offerings, loud music, festivals and assemblies, but justice and loving service (Is.1:11-17). The final judgment will be based on the Kingdom-sense of justice flowing from love. 'I was hungry, you fed me; I was thirsty .. Whenever you did it to the least of these, you did it to me...' (Mt.25:35-40).

The call of Baptism and Confirmation extended to all, intrinsically means a call to holiness, to authentic discipleship and to evangelical radicalism.<sup>566</sup> "Consecrated life as a basic charism, does not exhaust

<sup>562</sup> RM 51.

<sup>563</sup> CCBI 2001, *Laity in a Participatory Church*, no.3.

<sup>564</sup> Bandung Statement, 8.1.4.

<sup>565</sup> GS 1.

<sup>566</sup> *In the Union to Evangelize*, no.13, a).

all possibilities of evangelical radicalism, of prophecy, or prophetic abnormality which Christian existence might require. It is enough to think of those persons sometimes, married or belonging to the secular lay state, who have received a prophetic gift or a gift of evangelical radicalism as much in their style of life as in their mission. There are families that live in community, sharing all their goods in common, or families in itinerant or secular missions who risk their lives on the missionary frontiers.<sup>567</sup> We cannot reserve evangelical radicalism or the gift of prophecy to a section of the faithful. It is the Spirit who gives his gifts freely to those whom he wishes, but for the common good (1 Cor.12:4-11). Jesus Christ the Great Prophet continues his prophetic ministry, not only through hierarchy, but also through the lay faithful<sup>568</sup>. The lay people are “powerful proclaimers of faith in things to be hoped for when they courageously join to their profession of faith a life springing from faith.”<sup>569</sup> “When it comes to prophecy, there is no institutional division between those who speak God’s Word and those to whom they speak. The prophetic Church is the Whole Church, the entire People of God and the total Body of Christ in communion. That entire Church is summoned to be in communion both prophetic and tester of prophets according to the established rules.”<sup>570</sup> Communities and their leaders must realize that such a radical and prophetic voice, though often disturbing and painful, is a sign of the active presence of the Spirit and as such they should guide and foster it, not manipulate or destroy it. Jesus lamented that Jerusalem was a killer of prophets and refused to heed to his prophetic voice (Mt.23:37). So also every community can be a nurturer of the prophetic voice in the community or its killer. A community of disciples has a prophetic role in guiding the people in the paths of the Kingdom. Without such prophetic voice they are not often capable of the radical sense of the mission of the Church and of becoming a leaven of transformation in the society in which they are placed. SCCs help the community to become radical and prophetic in a genuine Christian sense.

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<sup>567</sup> Ibid. no.12, a).

<sup>568</sup> LG 12, 35.

<sup>569</sup> Ibid.

<sup>570</sup> Lawler, M. / Shanahan, T., *Church a Spirited Communion*, The Liturgical Press, Minnesota, 27.

Just to cite and example, listen to the report of the animator of Dera SCC from Talcher parish in Sambalpur diocese. "Once we were having the SCC meeting. As we were about to finalize our action plan for the week (at the 6<sup>th</sup> step of Gospel Sharing), a person from the group informed us that there was a Muslim boy, Mohamed by name, aged 18, who was beaten up by thieves. His cycle was stolen and his legs fractured. The injury was so serious that in the absence of immediate medical care his leg would have to be amputated. The family was financially unable to provide this care.

We all discussed in our SCC group whether we should help a non-Catholic and non-Christian. After some discussion the members reached the conclusion that Christ came to save all and therefore we should help this Muslim boy. Immediately a collection from every family was taken and the members also approached neighbouring SCCs for help. Mohammed was admitted in the Nehru Memorial Shatabdi Hospital at Talcher. His fracture was very serious and the doctor advised to amputate his leg. But we all requested the doctor to save his leg at any cost. Members of all our SCC units began to pray for Mohammed. The doctors and nurses were surprised at this act of charity and some even attributed a false motive (as an attempt to convert the family to catholic faith) to our act of charity and criticized us. But this did not discourage us as we were united and had the support of the community. All were firm in the decision to help. Mohammed was discharged after 100 days of hospitalization and now he is able to walk. Our community was very happy that the Lord had done this great service through us."

### **Non-dominating Leadership**

The Vatican II states that the bishop with his clergy has the task of shepherding the flock<sup>571</sup>. This understanding is a significant change from how Church leadership was understood in Pre-Vatican II era. Bishops and priests are pastors continuing the 'shepherding' or 'caring' function of Jesus<sup>572</sup>. It is not a dominating role nor is it a 'one-man's-show'.

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<sup>571</sup> LG 20.

<sup>572</sup> Ibid. 21, IL 35.

Not enough reflection has been done to help Church leaders to understand the full significance of this shift in leadership since Vatican II and its import in pastoral ministry. Many among the clergy and laity still see priesthood as a cultic function to perform religious rituals for its own sake and not towards the realization of the Kingdom vision. Pastoral care is interpreted as administering Sacraments, often in a passive way. There is no doubt that celebrating the Sacraments with the community is an important aspect of the pastoral care. But it involves also enabling and empowering people to take up their responsibility as evangelists and prophetic witnesses to the Gospel wherever they are present. There can not be a non-servant Christian anywhere in the world. The leaders must make sure that they see not only themselves as missionaries, but the whole community. Though Vatican II affirms this, majority of the community still considers the priests and religious as missionaries and missionary work is understood as conversion activities undertaken in some distant land among people of other faith.

Those who exercise leadership in the Church need to learn to function in a co-responsible way. The nature of the Vatican II ecclesiology is one of communion<sup>573</sup> and it is reflected in the 'collegiality in structure and order', and 'co-responsibility' in its functional style.<sup>574</sup> The collegiality of the bishops, the various commissions and committees in the dioceses/parishes, Pastoral Councils of dioceses and parishes are all signs of this new Church of communion. It calls for a community way of organizing things and functioning in the Church. The task of building the Body of Christ must be organized with the cooperation of all the believers, each member of the Body functioning as it should (Eph.4:16). The bishops are united with his priests as his collaborators<sup>575</sup> and maintain a fraternal relationship among them, consulting and dialoguing with one another in order to make pastoral ministry effective.<sup>576</sup> This collegiality reveals the variety and universality of the People of God and at the same time the unity of the flock of Christ.<sup>577</sup> After Vatican II, new forms of responsible

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<sup>573</sup> LG 7.

<sup>574</sup> Ibid 22.

<sup>575</sup> IL 86.

<sup>576</sup> PO 7.

<sup>577</sup> LG 23.

lay participation developed in the Church.<sup>578</sup> The pastors must arouse the ardent cooperation of all the faithful in the fulfillment of the missionary task of the Church.<sup>579</sup> The pastors should know that they are not ordained by Christ to take upon themselves alone the entire salvific mission of the Church towards the world. On the contrary they must understand that it is their noble duty to shepherd the flock and to recognize and activate the ministries and charisms of all the faithful so that with one mind, all may cooperate in this common undertaking according to their proper roles.<sup>580</sup> Theologically it is more sound to speak of a team of animators rather than a solitary leader since it witnesses to the fundamental communitarian nature of Church, preventing someone to speak of possessive expressions of 'my Church/diocese' rather than servant expressions like 'our community' or 'the community which I serve'.<sup>581</sup> The common priesthood of Christians is a genuine participation in the priesthood of Christ and it is an essential aspect of the new People of God. It implies that they are chosen by God as a bridge with mankind which involves every believer inserted into this People.<sup>582</sup> Hence empowering all the believers to use their talents for the building up of the community in the Kingdom vision and providing platforms for all to serve the community are the tasks of the new Church leadership. The pastor is not a mere functionary, providing a few services; his ministry is integral care of the faithful.<sup>583</sup> If all the tasks of community building are around the Church building and in performing rituals, then there is not much the priest can share with his people. But if the task of the community is understood as witnessing to the Gospel everywhere and preparing and strengthening communities to renew the society in which they live the Kingdom way, then we can see the importance of family, neighbourhood community and the need for people to meet in their neighbourhood so that they can discern together will of God and find ways to act

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<sup>578</sup> IL 94.

<sup>579</sup> Ibid.

<sup>580</sup> Ibid 30.

<sup>581</sup> O'Halloran 81; Lawler 95.

<sup>582</sup> The Congregation of Clergy, "The Priest Pastor and Leader of the Parish community", 6.

<sup>583</sup> Ibid. 22.

together. The ministerial function of the priest is a service within the ecclesial communion and demands respect for the roles of laity and religious and nurturing them in the spirit of communion.<sup>584</sup> The pastor ought to acknowledge and promote the various ministries and roles and offices proper to the laity, especially their role in sanctifying the secular reality and witnessing to the Gospel in the world.<sup>585</sup> In exercising their role the pastors should remember that they should have the edification of their flock in truth and holiness, remembering that he who is first is the last and servant of all.<sup>586</sup>

Pastors and leaders are also human beings and in need of the community. Their growth as leaders is also linked to their relationship with the community and their commitment to collaboration. They cannot grow apart from the community. The task of evangelization requires personal sanctity of both the pastors and the faithful, fervent apostolic spirit in both according to the demands and challenges of their specific states of life.<sup>587</sup> The ecclesiology of communion makes the life and ministry of the priest deeply inter-woven with the life and ministry of his community.<sup>588</sup> “The presbyters are brothers and among brothers with all those who have been reborn at the baptismal font. They are members of the one and same body of Christ whose upbuilding is entrusted to all.”<sup>589</sup> This brotherhood implies certain mutuality in maturing of faith and of fruitful ministry. Those ministers and leaders who engage in ministry wholeheartedly change in the process – their ministry and relationship with the community undergoes a gradual transformation.<sup>590</sup> Everyone is a ‘wounded healer’ – needing the community since one is also wounded and at the same time involved in the healing process of the community.<sup>591</sup> Pastoral care involves healing the community and its members; at the same time the leaders and pastors themselves must recognize their ‘woundedness’ and their

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<sup>584</sup> Ibid. 16, 18.

<sup>585</sup> Ibid. 22, 24.

<sup>586</sup> LG 27, IL 78, PO 9.

<sup>587</sup> The Priest, Pastor and Leader of the Parish Community, 2002, no.4.

<sup>588</sup> PO 12.

<sup>589</sup> PO 9.

<sup>590</sup> Rademacher 95.

<sup>591</sup> Ibid. 109, Whitehead 167.

need of the community to be healed and carry on the ministry. Let us not forget that the Church which preaches redemption, forgiveness, compassion and healing of Christ, itself stands in need of the same graces.<sup>592</sup>

The SCCs is capable of building and strengthening such a servant and team spirit in community leadership and mutuality which in turn empowers the charisms and talents of all the faithful. Some testimonies of priests will help in clarifying this.

Fr. Gregory Kootickal, the pastor of Mahaeshmunda parish in Bhagalpur diocese narrates his experiences in the old way of being Church and in the new way. He is a priest for 38 years. Of this, he lived 32 years in the old way. He was known to be a builder. Wherever he went he built something – a school, boarding, Church, parish hall, etc. When he went to a Church he always looked for something to be built. When people came, he met them just for formality and did what is just necessary, that too, as he thought right. No one could challenge that. He visited villages very rarely as he had no time. In Maheshmunda parish he was introduced to SCCs and he got into it like a reluctant Messiah. He says that the last 6 years of his ministry in this parish was building people through SCCs and he has not built any building here. As he says, compared to this 6 years experiences of building people, his 32 years was a waste. During these 6 years he converted the passive, disinterested community into a very active, and committed believers through formation of 12 SCCs. SCCs have given them, as they told me, a new sense of Church and faith. They work together now to make the Church visible to the world. They said that earlier, the villagers of other faith looked down on Christians; now they treat us with respect and look up to us for solving their problems in life. Earlier they felt bad to say that they were Christians; now they say it with pride. There is no doubt that co-responsible way of functioning demanded change in all and in the way the parish is organized.

In the parish of Killarkandom, Kothamangalam diocese, Kerala, after the SCCs were started, all the decisions in the parish are taken in consultation with the SCC animators. This is a new way of working with the priests in the spirit of Vatican II where church is the people

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<sup>592</sup> Rademacher 109.

of God. Earlier all the decisions were made by the priest alone. And all thought that it was the way for a parish to function. But now the priests ask the people about all major decisions in the parish. E.g. how shall we conduct annual retreat in our parish this year? SCC leaders discuss it with their people in SCCs and report back to the parish priest. Thus they are able to make enriched decisions and have greater participation of people. When the parish feast is to be celebrated, the parish priest ask the SCC leaders to discuss it in the SCCs first. Then the animators sit with the priest and make the feast-day plan. The result of this planning is that all the people in the parish feel responsible with the priest for whatever happens in the parish and they cooperate totally in all what is to be done.

### **A New Spirituality**

The Asian bishops give us the following understanding of the new sense of spirituality the Asian Church needs.

### **A Mission-oriented Spirituality**

“At the centre of this new way of being Church is the action of the Spirit of Jesus, guiding and directing individual believers as well as the whole community to live a life that is Spirit filled - that is, to live an authentic spirituality. It is nothing more and nothing less than a following of Jesus-in-mission, an authentic discipleship in the context of Asia.”<sup>593</sup>

Fidelity to Jesus is not just knowing doctrines nor is it mere following of rituals. Holiness is more than just reciting prayers. Authentic discipleship involves appropriately belonging to the Body of Christ and doing one's role in making the whole Body function as it should (Eph.4:16). God's will is that we become holy not as isolated individuals without any mutual bond, but by forming us into a single people.<sup>594</sup> The SCCs aim at a spirituality which activates all the faithful to understand and share in the mission of the community in a very concrete way making the Church alive and present in the neighbourhoods where Christians live. Being Church implies strong

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<sup>593</sup> Bandung Statement, 9.1.

<sup>594</sup> LG 9.

Christian bonding with one another and loving service. Although the paths in life and activities may be different, all have to strive to the same holiness under the guidance of the same Spirit, following Christ in their own paths of life.<sup>595</sup> In SCCs people come together for prayer, catechesis, Scripture reading and discussion on human and ecclesial problems with a view to common commitment.<sup>596</sup> Faith without action is dead (James.2:17). In SCCs the believers actualize the teachings of Jesus together in loving service,<sup>597</sup> just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many (Mt.20:28). That the Church is pilgrim and missionary in her nature,<sup>598</sup> is made visible in the life and activities of SCCs. The entire People of God is called to be in solidarity, respect and love for the entire human family and try to engage all in seeking solutions to various human problems, making the life-giving and transforming graces of Jesus available to all humanity.<sup>599</sup> The SCC makes this come true in very concrete ways in the neighbourhood. It is not possible to understand Christian existence without such a commitment to participate in the establishment of the Kingdom vision of Jesus.

### **An Authentic and Asian Spirituality**

“If people are convinced more by witnessing than by teaching, this is most true of the peoples of Asia whose cultures hold the contemplative dimension, renunciation, detachment, humility, simplicity and silence in the highest regard. We would have a message for Asia only when our Asian sisters and brothers see in us the marks of God-realized persons. Credibility is the fruit of authenticity. The sharing of what are our lived spiritual experiences is of incalculable necessities and importance in the tasks of evangelization and integral development.”<sup>600</sup>

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<sup>595</sup> LG 41.

<sup>596</sup> RM 51.

<sup>597</sup> Ponnunmuthan, S., *The Spirituality of Basic Ecclesial Communities in the Socio-Religious Context of Trivandrum, Kerala, India*, Rom 1996, 35.

<sup>598</sup> AG 2.

<sup>599</sup> *Ibid.* 3.

<sup>600</sup> Bandung Statement, no.9.2.

Each Believer is called to be a credible witness to his/her faith. No other person in his/her place fulfill that role where he/she is. The Asian Church has to re-discover the Asian countenance of

Jesus identifying ways in which the Asian cultures grasp the saving significance of the mystery of Christ and how the Church makes it available to them.<sup>601</sup> The living presence of Jesus is concretely experienced in relationships of people within the Church and beyond it.<sup>602</sup> This is why SCCs are so important. Christians living in a certain neighbourhood necessarily interact with people of different cultures and religions. Who they are there and how they allow the Gospel to transform their interaction will make Jesus a living person in them and among them. Only they can make the Asian countenance of Jesus shine upon all those who live there and make his saving grace visible.

### **An Integrative Spirituality**

‘Our spirituality has, therefore, to integrate every aspect of Christian life: liturgy, prayer, community living, solidarity with all and especially with the poor, evangelization, catechesis, dialogue, social commitment, etc. There has to be no dichotomy between faith and life, or between love and action, unless we wish simply to be like clanging cymbals, noisy and distracting, without depth and direction. In all things, we need to have a profound sense of the holy, a deep sense and awareness of God, his presence and mystery.’<sup>603</sup>

God’s presence pervades the whole of creation. Nothing is without him and nothing happens without his knowledge. The psalmist acknowledges that the earth and the heavens have their origin from God and his presence pervades them deeply (Ps.8). St. Paul says that the whole creation awaits the liberating grace of Jesus (Rom.8:21). “The consecration of the world, bringing it to Christ and Christ to it, is the primary call and challenge to the believer in communion, who is to be in and for the world under the gracious promptings of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>604</sup> . Genuine spirituality helps us to bring everything to

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<sup>601</sup> EA 20.

<sup>602</sup> Paths of Mission in India Today, Statement on National Consultation on Mission January 4-9 1994 at Ishvani Kendra, Pune, no.29.

<sup>603</sup> Bandung Statement, no.9.3.

<sup>604</sup> Lawler 140.

Christ to be sanctified by him and to bring that Christ-experience to everything around us. The communion of believers is deeply twined with the human race and its history.<sup>605</sup> “The Church is called and challenged to be a leaven at the heart of the world and its people.”<sup>606</sup> Jesus’ prayer to his Father was not take his disciples out of the world, but to keep them from the evil one (Jn.17:15). Holistic spirituality is integrative of all, transforming the whole of humanity and creation the Kingdom way. “It (holiness) is a movement toward wholeness, towards integration of body and soul, of matter and spirit, of secular and sacred, of humankind and the world, of immanent and the transient, of the self and the other.”<sup>607</sup> The SCCs help people in living such an integrated spirituality bringing everything to God and allow their whole life to be transformed by the grace of Jesus experienced, not just in liturgical exercises, but in the whole way of living and interacting with one another. Integration of faith and life is notable feature of SCCs.<sup>608</sup> Mr. Joseph from Kothamangalam diocese, an SCC animator, stated that working in the SCCs changed his attitude to his colleagues in his govt. office where he works. His wife testified that his attitude to her has changed. He sees in them God and he interacts with them lovingly as a servant of God’s mission, not as a boss anymore. The Word is the leaven which helps this integrative process of faith, life and action.

The Kingdom plan of God is the uninterrupted reign of God over all, where ‘God will be all in all’ (1 Cor.15:28). It is rooted in and leading to an ever widening and deepening experience of the Trinitarian love in the human community.<sup>609</sup> Kingdom is present wherever there is goodness and sense of harmony rooted in justice.<sup>610</sup> Hence it includes the individual, the neighbourhood, the society at large and all of creation. Use of the creation and created goods merely for profit-making or for one’s own comfort, mindless of the master plan of the creator for the preservation and survival of the whole of

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<sup>605</sup> GS 1.

<sup>606</sup> Lawler 140.

<sup>607</sup> Rademacher 199.

<sup>608</sup> O’Hallon 63, 64.

<sup>609</sup> Lombardi 79.

<sup>610</sup> O’Halloran 28.

creation, is pushing us and the future generation to a death trap. The whole creation awaits the liberating grace of Jesus to embrace lovingly the plan God and its fulfillment (Rom.8:21). Hence true and complete establishment of the Kingdom plan is achieved only when whole of creation is freed from the powers of evil to follow the path set by God. By bestowing upon humanity the awesome privilege and responsibility of becoming co-creators and co-preservers with Him, God plans to effect the total transformation of creation. This is only possible if they understand the Kingdom plan of God for themselves and for the whole creation. The whole world is 'godly', that is, that it comes from God alone, pervades his presence and is wholly in his power.<sup>611</sup> The Christians have the awesome responsibility to conscientize the people about that plan of God. The SCCs are a sufficiently interactive group and localized enough to search together for such an integrated spiritual journey.

### **A Spirituality Rooted in the Word and Church Traditions**

'We require a return to the very source of Christian life, to the Scriptures, to the living traditions of our Church, to the spiritual wisdom of our ancestors. And this return would have to be in dynamic interaction with a pervasive sensitivity to the aspirations of all, and especially of the poor peoples of Asia.'<sup>612</sup>

The Church has always venerated the Sacred Scriptures as the Body of Christ himself<sup>613</sup> and as the Word of God is read in the community it is Jesus himself who speaks to the community in their concrete situation.<sup>614</sup> The Word is the centre of the life of the Christian community and its mission<sup>615</sup>. To encounter God through the Word we will have to learn to relate the Word as "Thou", not "it". To place ourselves before the Word as Thou is to open ourselves to an intimate relationship with the 'Word-God' and it will definitely a transforming

<sup>611</sup> D'sa, F. /Padinjarekuttu, I./ Parapally, J. (ed.), *The World as a Sacrament*, 2.

<sup>612</sup> Bandung Statement, no.9.4.

<sup>613</sup> DV 21.

<sup>614</sup> Hirmer, O., *Gospel Sharing, Its Origin, Description and Theological Concept*, Pallottine Animation Centre Nagpur, 10.

<sup>615</sup> *Paths of Mission in India today*, no.49.

experience.<sup>616</sup> We have seen earlier how the Word continuously transforms and directs the lives of the community and its members in the Kingdom direction. Gospel Sharing enables the community to be in direct contact with the Spirit of Jesus and to discern personal and social situations of daily life in the light of the Gospel and act together the Kingdom way.<sup>617</sup> All the DIIPA lessons have sections of the Word of God, teaching of the Church, and a step to discuss its concrete application, helping the members of the community to reflect together on integrating the Word, the traditions of the Church and real life situations. In this way the DIIPA methodology aims at a dynamic interaction between faith and life.

### **The Anawim Community of Yahweh**

“For the spirituality of the new way of being Church is the spirituality of those who place their complete trust in the Lord, it is the spirituality of the powerless, of the anawim. Renunciation and simplicity, compassion for and solidarity with all, and especially with the poor, meekness and humanity - virtues promoted by active non-violence, are some of the significant features of the spirituality we need, and these Gospel values resonate deeply with the cultures of Asia. It is a spirituality of harmony - it expresses our intimate communion with God, our docility to his Spirit, our following of Jesus, as we challenge the disharmonies of our Asian world. It moves us away from images of exterior organization, power or mere secular effectiveness to images of simplicity, humble presence and service.”<sup>618</sup>

Our mission everywhere is a joyful discovery of and the surrendering response to the life-giving, transforming and creative presence of the Spirit in the world.<sup>619</sup> It is a clear indication of our conviction in the words of Jesus, ‘apart from me you can do nothing’ (Jn.15:5). Only a community that is humble and docile to the movement of the Spirit within its historical context can experience such a powerful transforming

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<sup>616</sup> Rademacher 194.

<sup>617</sup> Hirmer 12.

<sup>618</sup> Bandung Statement, 9.5.

<sup>619</sup> Paths of Mission in India Today, no.25.

grace in their lives.<sup>620</sup> Contemplative dimension is an essential element of all Indian religious communities as much as it is of the Christian tradition. After interacting with religious leaders from Asia, Holy Father Pope John Paul II himself affirmed that the future mission of the Church depends on our ability to lead people to experience the contemplative dimension of our faith.<sup>621</sup> The credibility of the Church will not depend on our institutional power, rather on how authentic our spirituality is, on the simplicity of our lifestyle and our deep loving relationships with all human persons.<sup>622</sup> If this is the benchmark of an authentic Christian spirituality the SCC is the place it should take place and the best means to attain and foster this spirit in the community. It is the place it should take place because that is where people live seven days a week and where that spirituality will be concretely seen. It is the best means to achieve it because its members are sufficiently small, interactive and committed to such a spiritual journey.

### **A spirituality which harmonizes the people of Asia**

“Its depth prepares us for ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue. It stirs up in us a faith and hope in the Lord of history, a sense of wonder at his mighty work, a hunger for the saving message, and beckons all to share in the ultimate goal of all human striving, which is the inner life of God.”<sup>623</sup>

The Church cannot exist anywhere in isolation. As Church encounters different cultures, she takes in positive elements and transforms and renews them in the light of the Gospel. This is an obligatory path of evangelization and those cultures become expressions of Christian faith.<sup>624</sup> The Church in Asia is challenged to engage herself in a genuine process of rediscovering the Asian countenance of Jesus, identifying ways in which the Asian cultures grasp the saving significance of the mystery of Christ and Church.<sup>625</sup>

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<sup>620</sup> Ibid. no.26.

<sup>621</sup> RM 91.

<sup>622</sup> Paths of Mission in India Today, no.64.

<sup>623</sup> The Bandung Statement, 9.6.

<sup>624</sup> EA 21.

<sup>625</sup> EA 20.

SCCs especially become potent places and agents of the inculturation of the Gospel, making it the Gospel of the people.<sup>626</sup> This human harmony can be sustained and fostered by SCCs in so many different ways. One such concrete example is the Reconciliation Committee SCCs have in the archdiocese of Trivandrum. These committees consist of members from different religious backgrounds and take care of human harmony in the SCC. Another example is that in Maheshmunda parish of Bhagalpur diocese the villagers come to the SCC leaders to settle their quarrels since they feel assured that the SCC leaders are deeply God-fearing people and give just decisions.

By itself then, such spirituality is already a living proclamation of Jesus, the Lord and Savior, unequivocal in its meaning, powerful and far-reaching in its impact.”<sup>627</sup> This is the sense of spirituality we want Christian communities to live and foster. There is no doubt that the SCC is the place and means such spirituality can be nurtured most effectively.

## Conclusion

The emphasis in all our discussions has been the theological foundations of “A New Way for the Church” in India according to the DIIPA methodology. It is new, not in the sense that someone discovered it now, but that we have been gracefully guided by the Spirit to re-discover the authentic spirit of the Gospel. When the Bishops of India gave the clarion call, ‘The Church in India will have to be a Communion of Communities where clergy, religious and laity are sisters and brothers and all are co-responsible participants in continuing the mission of Christ in their own places and times’,<sup>628</sup> it was a prophetic challenge to the community and its leaders to re-structure the Church so as to involve all the faithful in renewing themselves as evangelizing communities. What the Church is and what it becomes in real concrete ways and places is to be renewed, in the true fidelity to the example of Jesus who came to serve and not to be served. It is also an acknowledgment that SCCs is not another lay association, but it is a means to implement the Vatican II ecclesiology in a very practical

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<sup>626</sup> Gnanapiragasam, J. /Wilfred, F. (ed.), *Being Church in Asia*, Quezon City 1994, 63.

<sup>627</sup> Bandung Statement 9.7.

<sup>628</sup> CBCI Statement Pune 1992.

and radical way. DIIPA methodology is an effective tool to implement what the bishops of Asia and more specifically in India have exhorted us. This is a need of the Church in the third millenium and a moment of grace for all us.

The Bandung Statement of the FABC gives a fitting conclusion to this search for a new way of being Church, when it says:

“... the very being and heart of the Church has primacy over doing. This must be so, for effective doing can only result from the very depths of the Church’s being and authentic living. The Church has to become what it really is for the doing to begin, for the Church in Asia “to act justly, love tenderly, and walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8).”<sup>629</sup> Then the Church in Asia can think of fulfilling that prophetic dream of Isaiah: **“On this mountain, he has destroyed the veil which used to veil all peoples, the pall enveloping all nations: he has destroyed death forever. Lord Yahweh was wiped away the tears from every cheek; he has taken away his people’s shame everywhere on earth, for Yahweh has spoken”** (Isaiah 25:7-8).”<sup>630</sup>

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<sup>629</sup> Bandung statement 10.

<sup>630</sup> Ibid.



## Small is Big – The Pastoral Vision behind Small Christian Communities

Christian Hennecke and Dieter Tewes

What are Small Christian Communities? What are Basic Ecclesial Communities?

People in a European setting who learned about this radical and exciting ecclesiological perspective frequently struggled at first to discern the pastoral vision behind what was undoubtedly an ambitious approach.<sup>631</sup> After all, these communities are certainly not small spiritual groups, even though an assurance of one's own piety and living in community are important elements. Neither are they intended as replacement structures for parishes, even though Church development is also necessary. And they are definitely not an opposition movement within the Church, opposing the basic sacramental character of Church life.

### First glimpses

The development and promotion of local churches in South Africa – Small Christian Communities – has its origins in experiences on the continents where Catholicism has been growing since the 1960s.<sup>632</sup> The focus there was quite simply on the question of how the immense, almost insurmountable geographical distances between so many small villages within large church districts could be overcome and people enabled to experience Church as a living reality. In the

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<sup>631</sup> See also: Weber, F./ Fuchs, O., *Gemeindetheologie interkulturell, Lateinamerika, Afrika, Asien, Ostfeldern 2007*; Christian Hennecke (ed.), *Kleine Christliche Gemeinschaften verstehen, Ein Weg, Kirche mit den Menschen zu sein*, Würzburg 2011.

<sup>632</sup> For the general development of the worldwide Church see: Vellguth, K., *Eine neue Art, Kirche zu sein, Entstehung und Verbreitung der Kleinen Christlichen Gemeinschaften und des Bibel-Teilens in Afrika und Asien*, Freiburg i. Br. 2005.

cities, on the other hand, the problem was, and still is, a different one: if a parish caters for 40,000 Catholics, how can Church be experienced as a community? Is Church life limited to places that have priests and religious orders who can serve the parish? Does a church only come alive when this role is assumed by catechists at least?

Those were the questions asked at the time by Oswald Hirmer and Fritz Lobinger, two of the founding fathers in the development of this movement and both men with a typically Bavarian missionary mentality. They provide the starting points for a development that has its roots in the great pastoral vision of the Second Vatican Council. When Hirmer and Lobinger, responding to the renewal it triggered, founded the Lumko Institute as a pastoral institute of the South African Church, they needed to confront two tasks which subsequently became intertwined.

Oswald Hirmer was commissioned under a biblical apostolate and soon endeavoured to find ways in which the poor, and especially the illiterate, could be given access to Scripture. Fritz Lobinger was asked to integrate the idea of Basic Ecclesial Communities into the African cultural context, with Church districts as structures to serve self-controlled local churches.

Let's now change location and look at the diocese of Poitiers in France. Towards the end of a diocesan synod Bishop Albert Rouet wished to pick up where his predecessor had left off and get to know his diocese. He was faced with many empty rectories in villages and was asked a common question that was to become quite famous: "What's going to become of us, Bishop?"<sup>633</sup> Later, the Bishop and the community of believers of Poitiers would base their thoughts about the future on one major orientational focus: enabling the local aspect of Church life and thus indicating to their brothers and sisters how to live out their Christian faith and, as a Church, act together as the Body of the Resurrected Christ.

What may, at first sight, seem like a practical pastoral emergency programme outside ordinary Catholic European ecclesiality is in fact an ecclesiological paradigm shift in itself, with a visionary depth that still remains to be explored.

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<sup>633</sup> See: Feiter, R./Müller, H., Was wird jetzt aus uns, Herr Bischof?, Ermutigende Erfahrungen der Gemeindebildung in Poitiers, Ostfildern 2010.

## A movement in response to the Second Vatican Council

Insights and inspiring ideas from Council movements cannot simply be 'implemented': Councils (and also synods) are often charismatic moments in the life of the Church. The theological and ecclesiological 'blueprint' that was developed here for the Church was later reflected in charismatic renewals, and it is precisely this congenial charismatic movement in response to the Council which is associated with the appearance of basic communities and the development of Small Christian Communities.

The impact of spiritual communities and renewal movements must not be underestimated. Those who have kept a watchful eye on the emergence of those many and diverse post-Council movements and their ecclesiology will have noticed that Church communities which grow along charismatic lines seem to share the same perspective. On the one hand, a central role is played by the calling received at baptism and the common priesthood of all believers. On the other hand, Church life must clearly be based on a deep level of spirituality. Although such forms of spirituality may appear disparate (and 'alien'), they are nevertheless rooted in the Gospel and its life-giving message.<sup>634</sup>

The development of Small Christian Communities is a related and equally congenial charismatic response movement which – thanks perhaps to charismatic members of religious orders – has been spreading throughout the world at a fast rate.

### The Council vision *en miniature*

The Council developed a prophetic vision of the Church. Above all and most importantly, it distanced itself from any inappropriate ecclesiocentricity and did so precisely through profound reflection on its involvement with God and the world. Here, however, the hermeneutical key is not the structure, but the existential dimension of being Church. The starting point appears to be the concept of *participatio*, i.e. of partaking and encouraging others to partake. On the

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<sup>634</sup> See: Christoph Hegge, *Rezeption und Charisma, Der theologische und rechtliche Beitrag Kirchlicher Bewegungen zur Rezeption des Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzils*, Würzburg 1999.

one hand, this concept is, strictly speaking, Trinitarian and describes the relationship between the three Persons of the Trinity. Within the liturgical movement, on the other hand, this concept quickly becomes the epitome of genuine inner participation by a baptised person in the life of the triune God Himself. This perspective leads to an understanding of divine revelation and of Church whereby genuine fellowship with God invariably also impacts and moulds the life of the community and of Christians among themselves. The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church sees the Church as an iconic representation of the Trinity or, as St. Paul puts it, as the Body of Christ and as the People of God, wherein all believers receive the same dignity through baptism. This is the background against which, in the later phases of the response to the Council, we must understand the concept of *communio*. Without the remotest attempt to spiritualise the concept of Church, the 1985 Extraordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops described the Church as an existential experience of the community of the baptised. John Paul II sees his reference to a “spirituality of communion”<sup>635</sup> as an unfolding of this Trinitarian understanding of participation which, he says, is founded upon God’s own profound participation in the life of man, where it is expressed most clearly by the crucified and risen Christ.

This describes a further existential dimension of the concept of Church, as promoted, in essence, by the Council in its Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes 1*: “The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ.” These are blunt and challenging words, yet they are simply the translation of the Trinitarian and Eucharistic participation logic, describing our existence within the world, the ministry of believers, participation and learning about it. This dimension was formulated equally clearly in *Lumen Gentium*: “The Church is in Christ like a sacrament or as a sign and instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race.”<sup>636</sup>

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<sup>635</sup> NMI 43.

<sup>636</sup> On this response to the Council see: Hennecke, C., *Glänzende Aussichten, Wie Kirche über sich hinauswächst*, Münster 2011, 227-246.

How can such a breathtaking vision of Church life be born and how can it grow and gain shape?

The universal movement of Small Christian Communities – which, in all its different manifestations, has become a pastoral issue in many dioceses and at many continental synods – does not actually aim to form small communities but to create a culture of participation, which has its Trinitarian basis in baptism. So it does not come as a surprise that quite soon, in the 1960s, the East African dioceses set up a pastoral programme in which they described local churches and Small Christian Communities as “the most local incarnation of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church”. South African Christians began to talk about a ‘new way of being Church’, a phrase which subsequently also gained ground in Asia. It is quite apparent that this means not just a Church based on small groups or on networking, but an entire culture of ‘being Church’, measured against the theological and spiritual understanding of Church as expressed so profoundly by Vatican II.

### **A pastoral vision for post-modern Europe**

Christianity now finds itself in the position of a minority looking for new ways in which people can become and remain Christians. This poses a challenge that goes beyond the inherited faith and beyond the wider socially defined Church environment. The clearly diminishing number of priests also obliges us to adopt a new perspective. In the future, pastoral care will not be able to rely on its familiar care and service structures (which in themselves, are an anachronism) for it will be impossible to maintain them without a high level of organisation and intensive financial input. However, it is precisely structural measures of this nature that may well lead us to the fatal misconception that, in pastoral terms, we can continue with ‘business as usual’. After all, ‘we’re still managing somehow’.

If, however, we follow the logic that has characterised developments over the fifty-year period since Vatican II, we can see an opportunity for major changes in vision-inspired pastoral care. These comprise, on the one hand, the organic continuity in the development of local churches and, on the other, radical further developments arising from the Trinitarian theology and spirituality in the ecclesiology expressed in Vatican II.

Quite clearly, therefore, it is not merely a matter of forming ‘small fellowships’ or faith-based friendship groups – although such groups are bound to emerge from a pastoral development based on spiritual values. Rather, it means tuning into a pastoral culture that has its starting point in the shared baptismal dignity of Christians. In my experience, this is the vital distinctive feature of such a vision-inspired development of the Church. Crucially, its point of departure is neither the unquestionable need for restructuring nor any short-term broadening of pastoral activities to include hitherto unexplored socio-economic segments of the population. Rather, it involves a genuine turnaround in the way we think and act in pastoral care. It means opening up opportunities for baptised Christians, wherever they are, to flesh out and develop their way of ‘being Church.’ This requires the greatest possible level of participation and it leads to a range of questions about the development of a local church. For example, how can the development and life of the local church involve the largest possible number of Christians and their friends? How can baptismal dignity and thus the common priesthood of all believers be strengthened and enhanced? How can the talents and spiritual gifts of all baptised Christians be brought into play within a given locality? A local church development of this kind may well lead to a turnaround in practical Church life that is of truly Copernican proportions. Indeed, such a perspective makes it possible to take seriously any mature and growing forms of Christianity in a variety of places and environments – in other words not just within the ‘local church’ – and to treat them as part of a spiritual growth dynamic that is focused on sending people out and serving others. Whereas in the past the local church was seen as totally central and all other places simply as secondary (and thus as not really in the right “category”), the centrality of Christ can now shine forth absolutely anywhere and create a growth dynamic.

This often leads to colourful and diverse patterns of numerous and highly diverse Church venues which may pose new challenges within a parish. It may also put a renewed focus on the basic sacramental structure of the Church. After all, the sacramental presence of the Lord, which is given to us as we celebrate the Eucharist and in which we are His Body, now gains shape in the many different places and contexts where Christians are Church. At the same time the sacramental ministry of a priest acquires a new and deeper theological foundation.

Within such a scenario the role of the parish priest as a sacramental minister who leads, preaches and sanctifies can clearly become an effective service in bringing about unity in a broad sense.

Although this point cannot be elaborated any further here, it is worth mentioning that it involves intensive theological work, practical pastoral care and comprehensive growth in awareness. It is indeed a 'new way of being Church' – not by discarding previous experiences but by carefully heeding the signs of the time.

This strong focus on baptismal dignity and on trusting in the power of the Holy Spirit, which is so much in evidence among God's people, shows very clearly that we are dealing with a fascinating vision of a new way to inculcate Christianity in Europe, a vision that is well worth exploring. We are facing new beginnings and a situation that was understood clearly by the three Wise Men at the crib: small is big.

### **Vision turns into practical reality, as it is fleshed out and grows in the process**

Universal experience with the vision of the Second Vatican Council over the past fifty years has shown that, as local churches have responded practically, God's Spirit has gradually revealed to them how immensely this vision has reconfigured the life of the Church and that it is gradually growing and expanding.

The way to this challenging 'U-turn' in Church development was paved by individual bishops or entire bishops' conferences. They aimed to devise a pastoral approach that would open up a way to the common priesthood of all believers and enable them to develop their talents and spiritual gifts. Within this wider context of Church development Christians could become actively involved, spurred on by the statement of the Council that they were partakers of the priestly, royal and prophetic ministry of Jesus Christ. They saw that they could dare to accept responsibilities and take the steps they considered to be necessary when confronted by a specific pastoral, social or political emergency. Moreover, in this process, they understood that Christ Himself was on their side and that His Spirit was giving them strength. Initially, it may sound somewhat theoretical when the Council says that every Christian is called, has the gifts to make an essential contribution and can therefore 'be' Church. Yet, contrary to many people's

expectations, this statement did, in fact, turn into reality and became part of everyday life. The experience then led to new visions, providing an inkling of God's plans for His people as they journey through time. We have been, and still are, challenged to fathom God's dream – the dream He has about the Church as His instrument of salvation for all mankind. It is a dream which we must make our own and which we must discover in what He says to us through history and in our specific historical situation, through Scripture, through the Church's teachings (especially the Second Vatican Council) and through prophetic statements by the Pope, bishops, priests and the laity.

What we now know as a tried and tested vision – i.e. the pastoral approach of Basic Ecclesial Communities and Small Christian Communities – originally sprang from very small beginnings. In particular, it has become clear that it is not really possible simply to decree Small Christian Communities through some pastoral project. On the contrary, there is a need to gradually raise awareness of people's baptismal dignity and of the new quality of participation that goes with it. Although it was important and indispensable to have some 'pioneering dreamers', it was equally obvious that their visions could not simply be conveyed through teaching and then implemented. Instead, all Christians needed to be enabled to discover their visions and appropriate what has proved to be an exciting view of future Church life. This makes it possible to develop the picture further, as every Christian who joins in the dream expands the vision and adds something of what God has revealed to him. As Christians implement their vision and do so in an error-friendly learning environment, they begin to realise God's dream. Moreover, they realise that this dream is indeed good for mankind, that it is good for the Church wherever they are and that it fully matches the specific mission they have received.

Wherever such a culture of 'being Church' was given space, where trust was invested and where participation and baptismal dignity were gradually discovered and developed, local churches began to grow in their respective localities. Set against this background of a turnaround in Church practice and also a turnaround in the general understanding of 'being Church', we can describe the potential of such Church development in more detail. Conversely, this development

allows us to set up an entire catalogue of criteria for an ecclesiality that is fleshed out with life and which is focused on growth – an ecclesiality that enables local churches and other venues of Church life to discover space for growth in their lives as Christians and as Christian communities.

### **The sacred character of the Church: What kind of spirituality allows us to grow?**

Any talk about a person's baptismal calling and the common priesthood of all believers will remain purely theoretical dogma for individual Christians unless it matches their own experience. Following Vatican II many ordinary Christians rediscovered the Bible as the living Word of God and were thus in a position to undergo that experience. In Latin America, Asia and Africa mutual inspiration led to the almost simultaneous emergence of different ways of sharing the Bible and discussing Scripture. These were not primarily focused on a critical historical method of exegesis, but they made it possible to encounter the living Christ in His Word and to experience fellowship with others who heard the Word and who encouraged each other through it. This can also happen in Germany – in exactly the same way<sup>637</sup>. The following words, spoken by an elderly Catholic religious instruction teacher (who had grown up and been reared in a Catholic environment) after attending a Bible-sharing fellowship for the first time, are symptomatic: "I always used to believe that Christ is risen because I believed the teaching of the Church. Today, at our Bible-sharing fellowship, I felt for the first time that Jesus is alive. It was the first time that I experienced His presence in this fellowship with people I had never met before, people who read the Word together and shared with one another what had touched them."

This encounter with the living Christ is common to people on all continents (including oppressed women, the illiterate and members of marginalised castes and ethnic groups). It has enabled them to dream new dreams and has given them an inkling of what God might actually be planning for their lives. They have experienced a new sense

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<sup>637</sup> The reader's attention is drawn to the initiatives of the German Bible association Bibelwerk concerning *lectio divina*, i.e. studying God's Word together: [https://www.bibelwerk.de/sixcms/media.php/157/ld\\_einleitung.pdf](https://www.bibelwerk.de/sixcms/media.php/157/ld_einleitung.pdf).

of freedom and of calling, brought about by the living Christ and His Spirit within them.

It is, indeed, true that Christ speaks to us when we read and hear God's Word together. He speaks into each person's life, and our lives are impacted by what He says to us through Scripture and through fellowship.

An essential part of the pastoral vision received by the mothers and fathers of Small Christian Communities and Basic Ecclesial Communities increasingly becomes reality through sharing the Bible and through contact with God in fellowship:

- Christians meet in manageable groups to share the Word and to experience it as a living reality in their lives.
- They can feel the presence of Christ in their midst through the Word and through fellowship.
- By sharing the Bible they learn to use their own words in prayer and to talk to Christ.
- They see that it is Christ who creates fellowship. Their communities are therefore open to others.
- They understand in their hearts that this experience is not inconsequential but that it leads to being sent out by Christ.

Developing such spirituality, as a basic form of 'being church', naturally differs from one Church environment to another. It is important to appreciate that in the future there will be very different manifestations of Christian spirituality, depending on the place and mission of each Christian community: it takes a different form at a children's day nursery than, for instance, in a local church or in some other context where members are sensitive to their surrounding environment. However, what all these fellowships have in common is that they proceed in three stages: The first step is to discover what kind of spiritual practice is already present in people's lives. Secondly, it must be asked to what extent growth might be possible – a question which, thirdly, depends on the extent to which the Gospel is being heard and lived and the extent to which Church life in a given locality is impacted by the presence of the resurrected and living Christ.

## Becoming Catholic: focus on a specific environment

Whenever Catholics in Germany are asked at seminars and in lectures what they expect from their Church now and what the Church of their dreams would look like in future, the first things to be mentioned are fellowship and a spiritual home. They rank even higher than 'Christ in our midst', 'experiencing God' or 'life in the Spirit'.

Yes, faith in Christ does need to be lived out in community. Right from the earliest beginnings of the Church there has been this longing for, and experience of, fellowship in Christ through manageable social groups. Local churches are meant to be manageable communities, gathered around Christ in a specific locality and living their lives for Him. Almost everywhere in the world the organisational Church structure of a parish covers a variety of local churches. In Germany the word for a parish – *Pfarrgemeinde* (literally parish community) – was coined at a time when there was (still) a good supply of priests and full-time church workers, which meant that each parish was relatively small. It arose from the desire to experience Church as fellowship. Nowadays, however, it is obvious that a parish must be a community of communities, i.e. of local churches. German is one of the few languages that has one word for a local church or community – *Gemeinde* – and a different word for fellowship: *Gemeinschaft*. In many languages there is only one word for a distinction which, in German, is used for both religious and secular purposes. The English word *community* and the Spanish word *comunidad* cover both, denoting the fellowship of believers and the local church. Community or fellowship, therefore, needs to be manageable so that people know each another in person. This, in turn, requires it to be part of an intimate social environment, a shared and specific social context where relationships can grow. This is why Small Christian Communities have developed as substructures of large parishes that are divided into local churches or chapels. Such a shared and manageable environment is a place where Christians hope to live in peace with one another and where they long to experience fellowship. This is where they can have a genuine experience of togetherness and meet people who will require them as Christians to accept responsibilities within this intimate social space.

Such a setting poses a challenge, however, since the fellowship of a community and a spiritual home can easily become exclusive and a

local fellowship can quickly become a closed group. This is a challenge to us as Catholics. Catholicism is indeed a powerful vision, as it is a matter of broadening our view to include everyone who has been baptised and also everyone else within our specific environment. In *Gaudium et Spes* the Second Vatican Council clearly formulated the image of a 'pastoral community'<sup>638</sup> that is sensitive to its environment. Whereas the focus is very clearly on the social dimension in Catholic institutions and initiatives – e.g. charitable organisations, hospitals, old people's homes and children's day-care centres – this is an aspect that clearly needs to be re-learned by social groupings within the local church. And, in fact, the prospects look good. Since the 1980s, and particularly in the age of mobility, local engagement within one's immediate social environment has taken on a new relevance. This concern for the people near us now needs to be developed again.<sup>639</sup>

People's joys and hopes, sorrows and fears ... This is where they can be tangibly experienced and where we can also experience a shared feeling of belonging. It is a space for people's joys and sorrows, hopes and fears about their own immediate environment and also about more remote spheres of life and, indeed, the wider political and global context. Love for one's neighbour and a fight for justice always start on a small scale until this dream eventually also embraces peace and justice on a global scale.

Here, too, the pastoral vision of the mothers and fathers of Small Christian Communities and of Basic Ecclesial Communities is beginning to become reality:

- Christians see themselves and their community, which meets within their environment, as part of that environment.
- As they walk through the streets of their housing estate or village, they look at it 'with different eyes'.

<sup>638</sup> See also: Sander, H.-J., Nicht verschweigen, Die zerbrechliche Präsenz Gottes, Regensburg 2003; Wustmans, H., Fragile Orte der Hoffnung in der Pastoral, Von religionsgemeinschaftlichen Abstiegsverfahren und pastoralgemeinschaftlichen Aufstiegs-perspektiven, in: ThPQ 158 (2010), 408-416.

<sup>639</sup> See also: Hennecke, C./ Samson-Ohlendorf, M., Die Rückkehr der Verantwortung, Kleine Christliche Gemeinschaften als Kirche in der Kirche, Würzburg 2011; Dörner, K., Leben und Sterben, wo ich hingehöre. Dritter Sozialraum und neues Hilffsystem, Flensburg 2008.

- They are aware of people's joys and needs in their neighbourhood and they share them.
- They take part in the life of the community and accept responsibilities within it.
- They see and experience their community as a truly local church.
- By being close to people in their locality and engaging with it, they work out their mission to be the salt of the earth.
- As they read and share God's Word, they discover that they have been sent out precisely into this environment.

### **Becoming apostolic: the need for a specific mission**

Church is not an end in itself, but serves people and builds the Kingdom of God so that people can experience the Lord in a tangible way. Christians who share God's Word with one another in their communities and then listen to Christ as He speaks to them through the Word and through their fellowship discover that this is the way Christ sends them into their environment and then also into wider, more global contexts. Groups in Germany who decide to start Bible-sharing fellowships based on the seven steps proposed by the South African Lumko Institute often find it difficult at first to carry out step number six, "We search together", which is about being sent and being active. Many Germans are used to living out their faith along individualistic lines and to seeing it as part of their private, 'inner' lives. Or they try to derive specific instructions from the Bible passages they read. But it is only by being connected to a certain environment and by functioning within certain relationships that they begin to understand God's plan for themselves, i.e. their mission, as He actually sends them into their environment so that they can be of benefit to it and fulfil the tasks which are waiting for them.

Those who understand this will walk through the streets 'with different eyes' and will see the hopes and sorrows of others. It creates in them the dream or vision of a new world and of a truly local church that is involved in building God's Kingdom.

This mission includes both Church and the social context. On the one hand, there is the local church with all its pastoral issues and challenges; but, on the other hand, there is also the wider social

context in which the Basic Ecclesial Community or Small Christian Community functions.

As described in *Gaudium et Spes*, Christians begin to understand that, as part of this society, they can be 'leaven' within it. Ideas arise and dreams grow which show how, together with many of their contemporaries, they can mould this world in their own immediate environment and also further afield, and that this world can even be improved, albeit only in very small steps. People who, at one time, had purely individualistic dreams of a better future for themselves are discovering that, as Christians, they can only live and experience a better future together with others. God's Spirit breaks through any form of narrowness and prompts us to act for the benefit of the wider community. And as we act and speak about it together, we arrive at a joint vision of what our society might become and how our Church might develop. Ideas arise as to how the Church can serve the people and what the 'Kingdom of God' might mean for our neighbourhood, for our housing estate and for the Church as a fellowship of Christians. By accepting responsibility in the Church and in society, Christians develop a growing vision, thus appropriating more and more of God's dream for themselves and for the people around them.

This goes further than personal commitment. The question here is how the fellowship of believers can jointly accept the challenge of their time and of the "holy ground" (Ex 3:5) on which they stand. In fact, in view of our tendency towards individualism, we need to re-think the apostolic mission of the entire Church and therefore also the mission of each local church. Moreover, as we are sent out and respond to this mission, it becomes obvious what kind of theological image of the Church is guiding us. It is always the Body of Christ, who is continually with us, who sends us out and who does so with each one of us as parts of His Body.

Again, we can see that the pastoral vision of Small Christian Communities is about a highly practical and existential turnaround in the entire doctrine of the Church. Conversely, to initiate such growth, specific resources are required in order to create an awareness among Christians, so that everybody understands their own mission.

Experience in and with Small Christian Communities throughout the world certainly sheds some very bright light on the pastoral vision of this Church model:

- By sharing Scripture in fellowship and by becoming aware of their environment Small Christian Communities discover their mission to their locality and to its people.
- They serve people – both as neighbours and as a local church.
- They live a missionary lifestyle because, as Christians, they live with the people in their social context and form relationships with them.
- People with an interest in Christianity are accepted by them into their fellowship, where they gain first-hand experience of how Christians live. They come to a new appreciation of catechesis.
- In this way the members of the community discover their own talents and spiritual gifts in response to the needs and anxieties which they perceive among those around them.
- They undergo training that matches their gifts and time resources and show willingness to take on specific ministries (e.g. leadership, house visits, leading non-sacramental worship, bereavement counselling, welfare services, etc).

### **Becoming Church amidst the diversity of local churches: living in the spirit of the Eucharist**

The Eucharist is the source and climax of all Church life. Church has its very basis in the Eucharistic mystery and lives in it. But what does this mean in real terms? What is the image of our Eucharistically rooted Church in relation to the pastoral vision that lies behind the practical church life of Small Christian Communities?

The local church and thus the very centre of every parish is the celebration of the Eucharist. It is through the Eucharist and on its basis that all Christians live who, by virtue of their baptism, are now rooted in Christ, so that they form His Body.

The fundamental theological vision of the Church as a network of local churches must necessarily be Eucharistic in character. After all, it is all about the Body of Christ – the Church – with a wide diversity of members that add up to the shape and profile of the Body as a whole.

It is a Eucharistic picture, because the celebration of the Eucharist, through which the Church grows in all its diversity and as a network of local churches, has a very clear aim. Local churches are the results of the Word and the Sacrament and must therefore testify to the reality of the living and resurrected Lord in the world – and indeed within the environment where they live, or we might say: where they live Eucharistically.

This Eucharistic lifestyle is nourished by Scripture on a daily basis. Whenever and because Small Christian Communities experience the presence of Jesus and the reality of 'being Church' together through sharing the Bible, their members realise within their local context that, as a local church, they form part of the wider Church – the parish, the diocese and the universal Church as a whole. They are Church not just by themselves, but they experience themselves as Church within the bigger picture – the 'One' Church which manifests itself whenever the Eucharist is celebrated.

This is a spiritual experience which has been confirmed worldwide. Wherever small communities and local churches are nourished and live on the Word in their daily lives, Christians also have a special longing for the Eucharist. This longing is a profound hope that the liturgy which is celebrated will nourish each individual and the local Christian community.

What occurs here is a Eucharistic ecclesiology which multiplies the various social forms of 'being Church', especially within large pastoral entities. This multiplication, in turn, means that baptised Christians realise their baptismal dignity and take responsibility for the Body of Christ and its mission within their own environment. At the same time, they understand that they form part of something bigger than themselves, i.e. the Catholic Church – an embeddedness which they understand not as secondary, but as constitutive and foundational.

Yet this also shows that local churches, in particular, need the wider context of a parish and the unifying sacramental ministry of the parish priest. Within this understanding of Church the priest realises his function as a sacramental ministry to people and as a ministry to maintain unity.

This ministry of unity means precisely that the priest (and his

helpers) have the function of supporting and promoting local churches in their development and of enabling their growth. The provision of training and support for those who are responsible at the local level, their integration into responsible committees at the parish level, the celebration of the Eucharist, especially on weekdays, the supervision of local ministries (funeral ministry, catechumenate, catechesis, etc.) and the mediation of conflicts – all this serves to create a structure of enablement and empowerment.

After all, conversely, the deepening of local life through the Eucharist and the Word also leads to the unfolding of gifts and ministries: spiritual gifts come alive and the life of the local church blossoms and gains in vibrancy.

The pastoral vision of Small Christian Communities provides the practical Church framework for the realisation of a new way of 'being Church', so that the parish and its sacramental centre are realised in a given venue. The dream and vision of successful interaction between different Church levels – the local church, the parish, the diocese and the universal Church – can be realised through the activities of those involved, leading to specific structures which match the social and cultural conditions in a given place, in a given country and on a given continent.

Experience in a wide variety of countries within the universal Church has shown that this always includes the following:

- A network structure between the levels of the community, the church, the parish and the diocese
- Rules of delegation from 'below' and commissioning from 'above'
- Ministry teams for specific tasks
- A system of initial and further training for leaders and ministries
- A communication and networking structure in relation to associations, Church institutions, places with special pastoral needs, Small Christian Communities and the parish
- Profile of the sacramental dimension of the Church and its sacramental ministry with a view to ensuring diversification of the Church as a community of local churches

The Old Testament tells us that if there is no (prophetic) vision, the people perish (Proverbs 29:18). We can trust that God has already opened up the future for His people. He keeps giving us new prophetic visions and He has given us many radically new beginnings through Church development processes where baptised Christians are taking Him by His Word and are forming Basic Ecclesial Communities and Small Christian Communities. This has happened so that all God's people can grow – and not perish.

## Appendix



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## Index of translators

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